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# Meet the SUSTAINERS CIRCLE

**Sojourners Monthly Giving Club**

Family photo

**"When I stumbled across Sojourners, it was like finding a lost treasure!"**

## Tanya Brice, M.S.W., Ph.D.

### Sustainers Circle member!

A faithful member of the **Sustainers Circle** since 2011, Tanya appreciates the way *Sojourners* challenges readers, including her, to integrate their faith into every aspect of their lives. As someone who has taught social work at a Christian university, Tanya believes that *Sojourners* is a great model for her students, providing a clear, honest picture of the challenges and rewards of a life that takes belief and justice seriously: "It is wonderful to read about how other followers of the way live out their faith."

As an avid supporter of the mission of Sojourners, Tanya felt moved to join the **Sustainers Circle**: "It was not enough just to consume the resources that you make available. It is important to ensure that you are able to continue to do the meaningful work that you do."

Join Tanya, and more than 2,000 others helping us articulate the biblical call to social justice, by becoming a member of the **Sustainers Circle**. Visit **www.sojo.net** or call **1-800-714-7474** to join the Sustainers Circle today!

**TURN ON THE** tap and water comes out, right? But what happens when public water sources become privately owned, when this essential element is bought and sold on the market, rather than held in the public trust for public use?

Renowned water activist Maude Barlow and Wenonah Hauter of Food and Water Watch bring to life the story of water privatization in America. As climate change leads to water shortages, and as local governments struggle with shrinking budgets, corporations are seizing the opportunity to privatize water by buying up control. While this has been common in poorer countries for years, it's now happening in our own backyards.

But churches and community groups are organizing to keep water public and available. Some churches are even "adopting" their watersheds. The Bible is rich with images of water that symbolize new life and the fulfillment of God's promises. Reta Halteman Finger's Bible study traces water in the New Testament from Jesus' baptism to Revelation's vision of "the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God."

There are times, of course, when God's gifts flow beneath the surface. Mennonite pastor Ryan Ahlgrim tells the story of his own intellectual and spiritual struggles with belief—and the trust that's necessary to fully live a life of hope.

The ongoing crisis in Syria reminds us that the irresponsible export of arms too often leads to wars, atrocities, and human rights abuses. Anglican Bishop Peter Price explains the status of the Arms Trade Treaty, overwhelmingly approved in April by the U.N. General Assembly. Why have only four countries ratified it?

Finally, as we close out the liturgical year, we offer our thanks to Martin L. Smith for his discerning lectionary reflections over the past year and a half, helping us all on the journey to more closely live the Word in our daily lives. ■

# Letters

### WORD TO THE WISE

I liked David Gushee's article "Mr. Obama, Close Down This Jail!" (August 2013) about the travesty of justice that is Guantanamo. I must ask, however, that no one refer to the men who have been imprisoned there for years as "detainees." Do not let the U.S. government sugarcoat the fact that these men are prisoners. If the police stop me briefly for something, they detain me. They do not imprison me for years. Words do matter.

**Robert L. Boyce III**
*Lincoln, Nebraska*

### HOW TO ERADICATE RACISM

I find Rose Marie Berger's "Why Are White People So Mean?" (August 2013) inflammatory and utterly offensive. Judging people on their merit and performance is the imperative by which I live my life. Framing any argument based on skin color or a perceived historical or cultural bias is counterproductive.

We should treat people as people, not as one group pitted against another. I'm very sorry that this nation was formed on the back of African slaves, but I've never owned a person. Forming relationships based on trust and respect is the only meaningful way that all Americans can work to eradicate racism.

**Michael Hendrickson**
*State College, Pennsylvania*

"It sang my soul's grief, convicted my heart, and named the powers that possess us."

### PROPHETIC TOUCH

Thanks so much to Rose Berger and her article "'Why Are White People So Mean?'" She has become the first page to which I turn. She listens as a poet to the prophet on the street and sees and hears at a depth. I thought of Amos looking on a basket of fruit set before him and seeing the poor crushed like grapes. I read her account of the train ride when my heart was heavy with the verdict of the Trayvon Martin lynching. It sang my soul's grief, convicted my heart, and named the powers that possess us. She is a poet exorcist: "Come out of them," she cries. "Be gone."

**Bill Wylie-Kellermann**
*Detroit, Michigan*

### DRONE ON

I was appalled to read about Liberty University's program where they train drone "pilots" for the U.S. government ("Drones for Christ," by David Swanson, July 2013). I'm at a loss to reconcile such a program with the teachings of the Prince of Peace. Drone warfare seems to be a sophisticated way of exercising a Crusader mentality, especially when carried out by a "Christian" university. This reminds me of a quote I heard almost 50 years ago. A Christian pastor justified the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, stating, "We are doing a good thing for Christianity by killing non-Christians." Will we ever learn?

**Walter Everett**
*Lewisburg, Pennsylvania*

### EXTREME LOVE

"Overcoming Violent Fundamentalism" (July 2013), by Jim Wallis, is an excellent article. I often hear Christians talk about Muslim extremists, but the words of Jesus, "Blessed are the peacemakers," are never mentioned. I long to hear the church address this issue in a way that incorporates the teachings of Jesus. I would also like to hear more things in the vein of this article about how I can reach out to moderates in the Muslim faith. Thanks for being a voice that brings me back to the radical love Jesus modeled.

**Elizabeth Dowell Pascoe**
*Jacksonville, Florida*

***"I have something to say about that!"*** *Write to letters@sojo.net or Letters, Sojourners, 3333 14th St. NW, Suite 200, Washington, DC 20010. Include your name, city, and state. Letters may be edited.*

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BY JIM WALLIS

# Waging Peace in Syria

**IN EARLY SEPTEMBER,** President Obama told the American people that the use of chemical weapons by Bashar al-Assad of Syria was a moral atrocity that required international consequences.

Religious leaders agree with the necessity of a determined response to the Assad regime, which is responsible for the deaths of 100,000 of his own people, including the brutal use of chemical weapons on civilians. But many faith leaders are asking tough moral questions about what that response should look like.

We fundamentally reject the assumption that refraining from military action is "doing nothing." We need more imagination and a deeper response than the traditional one of military strikes, which haven't proven effective and almost always have serious unintended consequences, risk dangerous escalations, and consistently create more suffering for innocent civilians.

The words of Jesus are either authoritative for us or they are not.

As religious leaders, we are called to peace*making*, not just peace loving, which requires harder and more imaginative work than merely falling into old habits of military "solutions." Our priorities should be to mobilize global support for the many vulnerable Syrians—including the millions of refugees—and to do the hard work of conflict resolution that could lead to a political solution.

BUT THE CRISIS in Syria also gives us an opportunity to rethink how we respond to conflicts. The "war fatigue" in America is deeper than just the national tiredness of war. It is also the result of the failure of military responses in answering the real threats of terrorists and brutal dictators such as Assad.

It's time for more creative and courageous "prophetic imagination" in terms of nonviolent solutions. What does it look like to wage peace? As we learned from Secretary of State John Kerry's remark about Assad turning over chemical weapons, there are often diplomatic solutions to the problems that war pretends to solve—but how can governments foster this type of creative problem-solving? And how can faith communities challenge them to do so?

Pope Francis was one of the first to speak out against the use of chemical weapons in Syria and also one of the first against military strikes. The pope said, "Violence begets violence." That is not merely an idealistic religious statement; it reflects the reality of failed military responses to terrorism over the past decade.

Investing early to prevent conflicts from escalating into violent crises is, on average, 60 times more cost effective than intervening after violence erupts. But the world spends just $1 on conflict prevention for every $1,885 it spends on military budgets. That stems from the habit of war, not from any demonstrated effectiveness—a habit we need to break.

While governments often turn to force to maintain security and bring perpetrators to justice, it will take much more creative strategies to defeat terrorists. This goes back to Paul's strategy of feeding one's enemies to "heap burning coals on their heads" (Romans 12:20). For example, the Muslim world needs assistance from the West in education, especially of its young women, the building of technology and infrastructure, and a focus on economic development—not more weapons and money poured into the coffers of corrupt regimes.

In a world wracked with violence, the words "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9) are not only challenging, they are daunting. The hardest saying of Jesus, and perhaps the most controversial in our post-9/11 world, is "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). How many U.S. churches have heard sermons preached from either of these texts in the years since America was attacked? Shouldn't we at least have a debate about what the words of Jesus mean in our world of terrorist threats and wars of occupation?

The words of Jesus are either authoritative for us or they are not. They are not set aside by the threats of terrorism and dictators or by our habits of war. Other alternatives have proven to be effective, such as responding to crisis early, promoting preventative actions, using diplomacy, strategically deploying development aid, strengthening civil institutions, and prioritizing international actions, especially in working together to prevent atrocities.

The civil war in Syria, with its ethnic/religious and geopolitical roots, clearly will not be easily resolved by U.S. missiles. Understanding such conflicts and employing the tools of conflict resolution is much more likely to be effective than the old, simplistic habits of military actions.

Modern warfare with missiles and drones makes it much easier to kill from a distance without "boots on the ground," but the violence continues to destabilize societies already devastated and unstable. When we respond to violence with more violence, the cycle of retribution continues to grow. It's time to challenge the calculus of war with a deeper and smarter moral equivalent to violence. ■

***Jim Wallis** is editor-in-chief of* Sojourners *magazine.*

EPE/C.J. Gunther

**All Ye Who Labor**

**Ashley J. Johnson, front, of Urban Hope Refuge Church in Hartford, Conn., supports employees in a Subway restaurant demanding $15-an-hour wages and the right to unionize. Subway employee James Goolsby, 24 (in white T-shirt), has worked at the restaurant for seven years. "I'm here six days a week, one day off a week, and I'm bringing home not even $300," he told a Connecticut news outlet. Fast-food workers went on strike this summer in more than 60 cities across the country.**

*By Sara Wenger Shenk*

# Unfinished Business

**John Howard Yoder's history as an abuser clouds his legacy.**

**JOHN HOWARD YODER,** who died in 1997, was a theological educator, ethicist, historian, and biblical scholar. He is best known for his 1972 masterpiece *The Politics of Jesus*, his radical Christian pacifism, his influence on theological giants such as Stanley Hauerwas, and his advocacy of Anabaptist perspectives within the Mennonite community and beyond. Many testify that Yoder's exposition of the gospel allowed them to grasp radically good news in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ.

There is a dark cloud over Yoder's legacy, however, that refuses to dissipate. Survivors of Yoder's sexual abuse and other advocates have renewed their calls for the Mennonite Church, including Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS), to revisit unfinished business with his legacy.

On Aug. 19, the executive director of Mennonite Church USA, Ervin Stutzman, announced the formation of "a discernment group to guide a process that we hope will contribute to healing for victims of John Howard Yoder's abuse as well as others deeply hurt by his harmful behavior. We hope this work will lead to church-wide resolve to enter into lament, repentance, and restoration for victims of sexual abuse by other perpetrators as well."

A brief history: Charges against Yoder of sexual abuse were reported as early as the mid-1970s to the president of Goshen Biblical Seminary (now AMBS), where Yoder was a professor and former president. After prolonged and failed attempts to work with Yoder in a biblical, Matthew 18 manner, his employment at AMBS was quietly terminated in 1984 and he moved to full-time work at Notre Dame. At the urging of several survivors of Yoder's abuse, a task force from his local congregation convened in 1991 to deal with "persistent rumors of sexual misconduct." They concluded that Yoder had "violated sexual boundaries." Finally in 1992, Yoder submitted to a disciplinary process led by an accountability and support group of the Indiana-Michigan Conference of the Mennonite Church. Following an intense four-year process, leaders reported its conclusion in the church press. While they recommended continuing an accountability plan, they also encouraged the church to again "use [Yoder's] gifts of writing and teaching." Yoder died suddenly on Dec. 30, 1997, a week after he was welcomed back to his congregation.

Although a measure of healing followed the conclusion of the disciplinary process, so did profound disappointment. Questions persisted about the scope of his sexual abuse, why it took so long for any church leader to publicly denounce Yoder's behavior, and why no one had the moral courage to publicly validate the testimonies of the many abuse survivors in ways that empowered them to find healing. Due in part to the confidentiality of the process insisted on by Yoder, doubts persisted about whether he really confessed his sin and

demonstrated remorse. With the recent calls for today's church leaders to deal with the unfinished business, there's also bewilderment about why earlier church leaders dealt with Yoder's sexual sin in such a quiet manner. In this day of widely reported abuse scandals, with perpetrators ranging from Catholic priests to Penn State's Jerry Sandusky, such behavior looks like collusion and cover up.

In summoning a discernment group, current Mennonite Church leaders are committing to a new transparency in truth-telling. This process is intended to discern how the Mennonite Church and its institutions may have failed to deal justly and redemptively with survivors, and to reaffirm practices and policies that assure protection against such abuse in the future.

Yoder's behavior deeply wounded many and casts a dark shadow on his legacy. It is also true that Yoder's exposition of the gospel has proven transformative for many. Providentially, it is because of the gospel that we can fearlessly name sin and more fully acknowledge the far-reaching evil that was perpetrated; we can lament for all who have been betrayed and violated by church leaders they trusted. May the power of the gospel move us to repent of our participation in evil, forgive each other, and live into the joy of reconciliation. ■

***Sara Wenger Shenk** is president of Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Ind.*

*By Peter Price*

# The Knotted Gun

**Is the NRA preventing the U.S. from regulating the international arms trade?**

**IN 1988,** a bronze sculpture of Carl Fredrik Reuterswärd's knotted gun was placed outside the United Nations headquarters in New York. As Kofi Annan, former U.N. secretary general and Nobel Peace laureate, remarked at its unveiling, the sculpture isn't just a cherished piece of art, but a powerful symbol that encapsulates in a few simple curves the greatest prayer of humanity: not for victory, but for peace.

Inside the U.N. building is a mosaic representing all the nations of the Earth, accompanied by Jesus' words, "Do unto others what you would have others do unto you." For many seasoned peace campaigners, myself included, this prayer was partly answered when the 193-nation U.N. General Assembly overwhelmingly approved the Arms Trade Treaty in April.

The treaty seeks to regulate the international trade in conventional arms, from small arms to tanks, combat aircraft, and warships. It aims to foster peace and security by putting a stop to the destabilizing flow of arms to conflict regions. This process cannot, however, be only a matter of negotiation and numbers. What needs to undergird the treaty is protecting humans, made in God's image. What needs to motivate the treaty is ensuring the possibility of what philosopher Hans Jonas called "the permanence of an authentically human life on Earth."

The statistics are frightening. Globally, one person dies every minute from armed violence. This treaty will help halt the uncontrolled flow of arms and ammunition that fuels wars, atrocities, and rights abuses. The devastating humanitarian consequences of the two-year war in Syria, a war fueled in part by the irresponsible export of arms, underline just how urgently this treaty is needed.

What the conflict in Syria has exposed, as elsewhere, is the direct relationship of the arms trade to violation, rape, and murder, particularly of women and girls. Sexual violation has become the concomitant weapon to rockets, bombs, and guns.

Securing the Arms Trade Treaty has been a long, arduous journey, and there is much that needs to be done. To date, 83 countries have signed the treaty but only four have ratified it. As with other multilateral treaties, it will only come into force when it is ratified by 50 countries.

Secretary of State John Kerry has indicated

Getty Images

**U.S. Gun Deaths Since Newtown**

**7,793**

(Note: Includes only those reported in the news.) Source: Slate.com, as of Sept. 1


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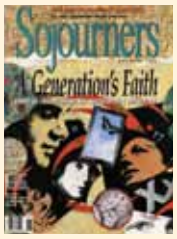
## From the Archives

*November 1994*

### Losing Innocence




**I GREW UP** in rural Mississippi, a black girl who lived "out in the booneys," fairly isolated from peers outside school. My God-fearing parents brought me up in an African Methodist Episcopal church that stood just beyond the edge of the woods. At the right age, I waded into a muddy watering hole, only recently vacated by the cows who drank there, and got dunked by the preacher and welcomed into the church and the kingdom of God.

That was my baptism, but I wouldn't call it a conversion experience. I felt very innocent then, and would until I left home for college in Massachusetts. There I got my first taste of diversity. Most of my classmates didn't believe as I did. Most of my African-American friends felt as if my faith was some kind of relic from our slave heritage, a white-supremacist trick that I had bought into.

Up until then I hadn't had any inclination to become political, and life hadn't given me any reason to be angry. I still haven't learned these traits well, even though it was in the educated Northeast, not the backwoods of Dixie, that I personally experienced the pain of racial hatred, sexism, and religious bigotry for the first time. ... I'm sure my generation will continue to struggle with meaning, identity, and purpose until they come to realize that, from an eternal perspective, the only equal opportunity that matters is our equal access to God's grace. ■

***Jennifer Parker** was an assistant editor with* Urban Family *magazine when this article appeared.*

that the U.S., the world's number one arms exporter, will sign the treaty as soon as the official translations of the document are completed, but he has given no indication as to when the U.S. might ratify it. Unfortunately, the Obama administration faces an uphill ratification battle in the Senate, which passed a resolution in March opposing the treaty. An Arms Trade Treaty without the active support of the U.S. would have little impact.

Though the treaty doesn't explicitly regulate domestic gun sales, the National Rifle Association has been a vocal critic, arguing that it threatens the rights and privacy of U.S. gun owners. Sadly, this lobbying strategy, which presents the knotted gun as an anti-American symbol, seems to be paying off. One hundred thirty members of Congress wrote to President Obama on May 30, pressing him not to sign the treaty on the grounds that it threatens "our national sovereignty and our constitutional rights."

As a seasoned observer of U.S. politics, it saddens me to think that this treaty, which could do so much to foster peace and security in our fragile world, could be held hostage to misinformed views circulating on Capitol Hill.

Until the treaty is signed, sealed, and delivered, it is important that we continue to demand a robust arms treaty that will truly "protect the human," as the Amnesty International slogan has it. The responsibility of all believers, from all traditions, is to understand and demonstrate that the search for a personal God, and respect for the human, belong together. ■

***Bishop Peter Price** is former bishop of Bath and Wells of the Church of England and member of the House of Lords. He is chair of Conciliation Resources and adviser to the archbishop of Canterbury on peace and justice issues.*

*By Beau Underwood*

## Why the Debt Ceiling Matters

**These manufactured crises show how much our politics could use a dose of moral sanity.**

**AS FIGHTS ABOUT** the budget and other economic issues are again riveting the nation's capital, the rest of the country yawns. Possible government shutdowns, threats to default on our nation's debt, and proposals to decimate food assistance for struggling Americans seem to be business as usual in Washington, D.C. These budget battles have become so frequent that it is tempting to dismiss it all as political posturing. But that would be a mistake.

The biggest challenge facing Congress should be a non-issue. The debt ceiling is simply the amount of debt the U.S. is legally allowed to hold. It is about paying off the bills that Congress has already incurred from past appropriations—not about giving permission for new government spending, as many people falsely assume. Congress has raised it nearly 100 times since the end of World War II, but it only recently became a political football. Because the consequences of not raising the debt ceiling and defaulting on our nation's obligations could be catastrophic, some leaders have tried to leverage it for political gain. After the country came close enough to a default in 2011 to receive a credit downgrade, President Obama has responsibly refused to negotiate over raising it. His assumption is that GOP leaders in Congress wouldn't throw the economy off the cliff for their own political gain. The American people are left watching this game of chicken and hoping somebody blinks.

While this is clearly a partisan game, the stakes couldn't be higher. The U.S. has always honored its debts. Should the country default, the market turmoil and long-term effects could be catastrophic for the global economy. Domestically, it could throw the U.S. back into recession.

The costs are also significant. According to the Government Accountability Office, the credit downgrade caused by the 2011 fiscal showdown resulted in $1.3 billion in increased borrowing costs for that fiscal year. The Bipartisan Policy Center has estimated that interest payments could be nearly $19 billion higher over the next decade. These political showdowns have made the U.S. a more risky investment, which means creditors demand higher interest rates when

buying our debt. While many Republicans claim these fights are about fiscal responsibility, these manufactured crises have actually added to our fiscal challenges.

Washington has to find a way to keep the lights on. The fiscal year began Oct. 1, but at this writing Congress has not passed the legislation required to fund the new year. Many leaders are trying to replace the automatic "sequestration" cutbacks with alternative reductions and new revenue that would be more targeted and less detrimental to the economy. However, there is disagreement between Republicans and Democrats on what this might look like. Further complicating the budget picture, some GOP senators, most notably Ted Cruz, Mike Lee, Rand Paul, and Marco Rubio, are refusing to vote for a continuing resolution that keeps the government open unless the Affordable Care Act is defunded in the process. Obviously, that's not something Democrats are willing to entertain.

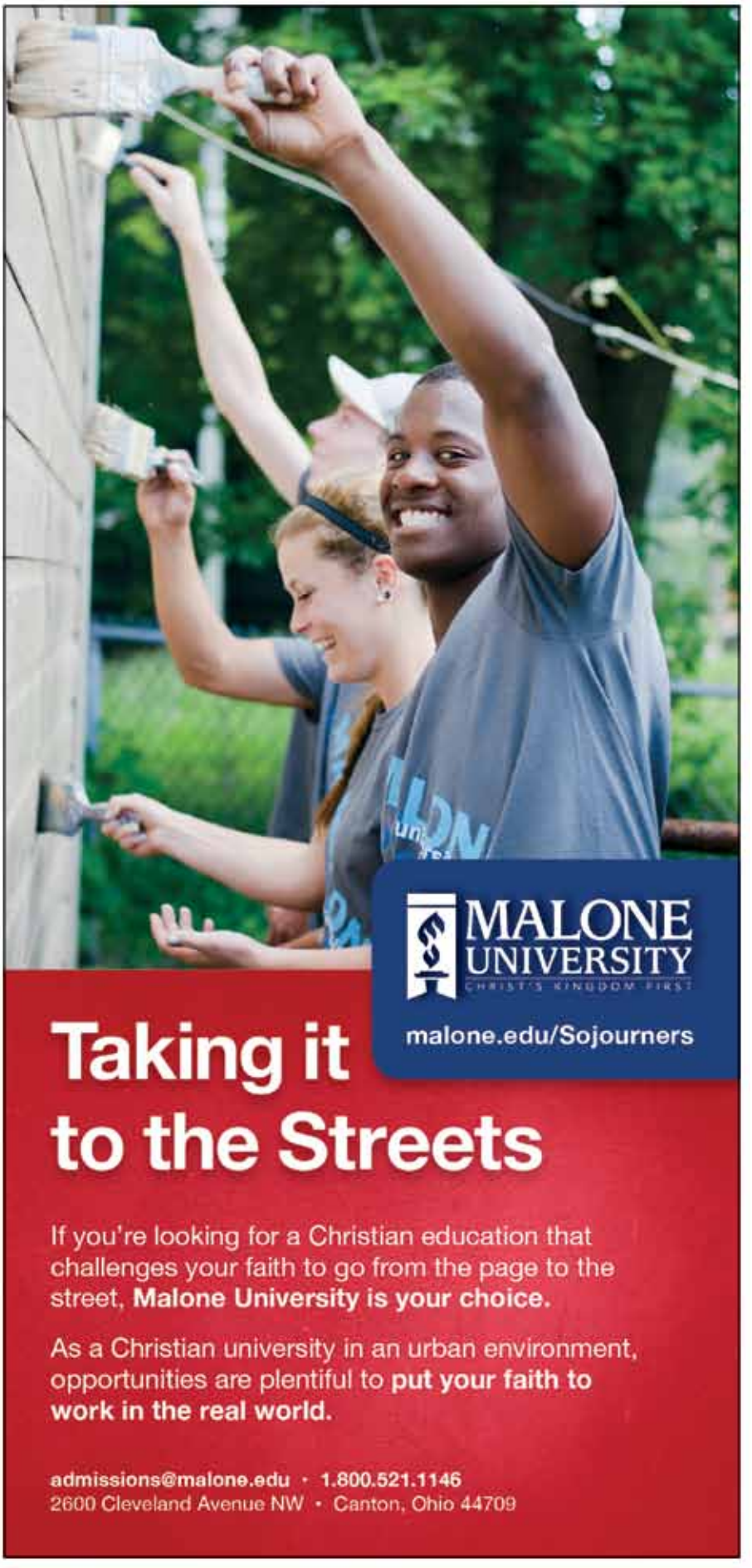
**The debate is not about giving permission for new government spending, as many falsely assume.**

The push to slash spending on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) has received less attention, but it could have devastating consequences. Republicans are expected to push for $40 billion in cuts, which would reduce essential food for 4 million to 6 million vulnerable people.

All of these issues raise an important question: What are our leaders doing? Clearly, they are more focused on their political self-interest than the common good. The political dynamics in Washington have not changed, so it is naïve to think that this dysfunction will end in the near future.

But every crisis is also an opportunity. Our politics could use a dose of moral sanity, and the faith community is uniquely equipped to provide it. Somebody needs to remind Washington that we elect leaders to solve problems, not create them. ■

***Beau Underwood** is director of campaigns and advocacy at Sojourners.*



BY LYNNE HYBELS

# A Dogged Pursuit of Middle East Peace

**GEORGE MITCHELL,** the former U.S. senator who famously brokered peace in Northern Ireland, knows the path to peace is unpredictable. "Until it happens," he said, "you can't predict with certainty. ... You can't take 'no' for an answer. ... You just have to keep at it until peace is achieved."

After five years of stalled Middle East peace talks, Secretary of State John Kerry lured Israeli and Palestinian negotiators back to the peace table in July. Sadly, my desk is littered with articles by naysayers who seem more than willing to "take 'no' for an answer" when it comes to peace in the Holy Land.

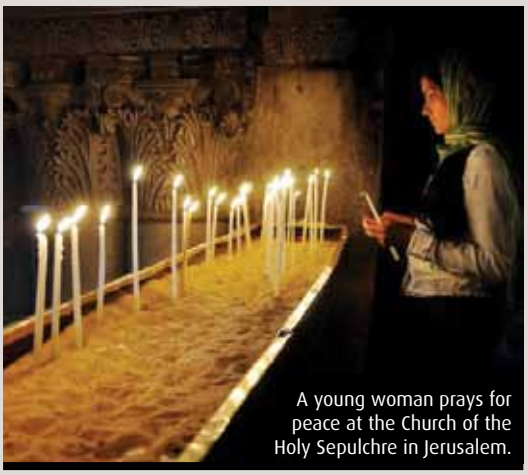
Naysayers point to the expansion of Jewish settlements and the political power of Israeli hawks, as well as the divisions in Palestinian society that convince them there is "no true partner for peace." Certainly years of disappointments and failed negotiations offer ample cause for skepticism.

"The alternative—not having negotiations—is guaranteed to fail."

But I agree with Faisal Abbas, who suggests that cynicism is a lazy option we can't afford. "Negotiations may succeed or fail to achieve peace," he writes, "but the alternative (not having these negotiations) is guaranteed to fail."

He is not alone. For every pundit preaching pessimism, I find another betting on hope. "The deal is still workable. It is still politically viable," writes Ben Birnbaum in *The New Republic*. He notes an increasing willingness to compromise in both Israeli and Palestinian public opinion, Kerry's tenacity, as well as Arab League support for the peace process.

Lara Friedman writes compellingly in *The Jewish Journal* about another reason to pursue peace: The stakes are simply too high to give up. "The current Kerry-backed peace effort is probably the last, best hope for achieving Israeli-Palestinian peace in this generation." Without it, she predicts, the conflict will play into the hands of extremists on both sides, "with devastating implications for everyone else ... mutual bloodletting." To avoid that, she says, "we must doggedly support the pursuit of peace ... refusing to allow skeptics, cynics, and spoilers to demoralize us or distract us from our goal."



A young woman prays for peace at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

Christine M. Anderson

I know Lara. An experienced former U.S. diplomat who loves Israel and cares deeply about Palestinians, she's an expert in policy and international affairs. I don't share her expertise, but I do share her belief that we must doggedly pursue peace. In fact, that's why I got involved in Israel-Palestine five years ago. On an educational trip to the region, I met Israelis who are committed to a secure future for their country but also want freedom for Palestinians. I met Palestinians who long for an end to the Israeli military occupation but adamantly condemn the use of violence. In this column and elsewhere, I've written about numerous Israelis and Palestinians actively working for reconciliation.

Just months ago in Bethlehem, I met with a Jewish organization that takes young American Jews into the Palestinian West Bank so they can better understand the daily reality of Palestinians living under occupation. I just read about a Palestinian college student volunteering with a Jewish organization so she can better understand the Israeli perspective and security concerns.

Too bad we so seldom hear these stories in the news. If all I knew about Israeli-Palestinian peace was the published analyses of the political peace process, I might lean toward the side of the naysayers. But when I see this deeper layer of peacemaking—this critical, grassroots layer—gaining strength day after day among Israelis, Palestinians, and a growing group of American Christians, then I bend toward hope. Ordinary people who are actively pro-Israeli, pro-Palestinian, pro-American, and pro-peace inspire me to work for peace.

To those who are also pro-Jesus, I say: Let's pray. Let's pray diligently for wisdom and humility for Secretary Kerry, Prime Minister Netanyahu, President Abbas, and their negotiating teams. Let's pray that they will be able to stand firmly against the rejectionists among their own people and lead courageously toward peace. Finally, let's pray for the grassroots peacemakers who are building a foundation upon which lasting peace can rest. ■

***Lynne Hybels,*** *co-founder of Willow Creek Community Church in Illinois, is author of* Nice Girls Don't Change the World.

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BY EBOO PATEL

# Mapping Gandhi's Faith Journey

**MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.** once said that the greatest Christian of the 20th century was not a member of the church. He was referring to Mohandas Gandhi. A remarkable number of King's fundamental beliefs—the use of active nonviolence as a tool of social reform, the commitment to loving one's enemies—can be traced back to the influence of Gandhi, which means that one of the defining figures of 20th century American Christianity was profoundly shaped by the example of an Indian Hindu. As King said in 1958 of the civil rights movement, "Christ furnished the spirit and motivation while Gandhi furnished the method."

Rex photo

But what of Gandhi's influences? How did a skinny, middle-class, mid-caste Indian, so scared of public speaking as a student that a classmate had to read his speeches aloud for him, come to lead one of the great liberation struggles of the past century? A new book by Arvind Sharma, professor of comparative religions at McGill University, makes the case that the source of Gandhi's strength was his spirituality. And while the heart of Gandhi's faith was Hindu, as King's was Baptist, the influences were remarkably diverse.

## How did a skinny, shy, middle-class Indian come to lead one of history's great liberation struggles?

Pointing out that most of the biographies of Gandhi really tell the story of *Mohandas* Karamchand (the name he was given by his family), not *Mahatma* (a title that means "great soul" and is given to saints in India), Sharma's book *Gandhi: A Spiritual Biography* sets out to give an account of the Mahatma. Sharma quotes Gandhi directly on the importance of highlighting the dimension of spirituality in any attempt to understand him: "What I want to achieve—what I have been striving and pining to achieve these 30 years—is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain *moksha* [the Hindu term for liberation]. I live and move and have my being in pursuit of this goal."

What struck me most in Sharma's biography was Gandhi's interfaith journey as a student. As King first encountered Gandhi's work at Morehouse College and later at Crozer Theological Seminary, so Gandhi's conversations about religion during his days as a law student in London shaped him for the rest of his life. In London, Gandhi read about the Prophet Muhammad and came to admire his bravery and austerity. He attended the funeral of an atheist and decided he could respect someone whose actions he appreciated, even when their belief systems were very different. Most profoundly, Gandhi got a different view of Christianity.

As a child, Gandhi had developed a strong distaste for Christianity, mostly as a result of watching Christian missionaries hound Hindus in his hometown to convert. When someone finally did convert, the missionaries would make them eat beef, drink alcohol, and wear Western clothes.

This might have been Gandhi's entire experience of Christianity had he not gotten into a conversation with a Christian at a boarding house in England. The man, a fellow vegetarian and teetotaler, suggested that Gandhi read the Bible, with special attention to the Sermon on the Mount. The description of the holiness of meekness and mercy in those verses went straight to Gandhi's heart, shaping for the rest of his life his views on the meaning of moral force. Gandhi's reading of Tolstoy while in South Africa and his friendships with Christian theologians and ministers during the India campaigns are all predicated on the conversation with that Christian in England and the Bible study that followed.

As I read those pages in Sharma's biography, I thought to myself: This is precisely why working with young people is so important. As the interfaith journeys of King and Gandhi illustrate, formative experiences with religious diversity can create a moral and spiritual foundation upon which greatness is built. ■

***Eboo Patel,*** *founder of the Interfaith Youth Core, writes about social justice from his perspective as a Muslim American of Indian heritage.*

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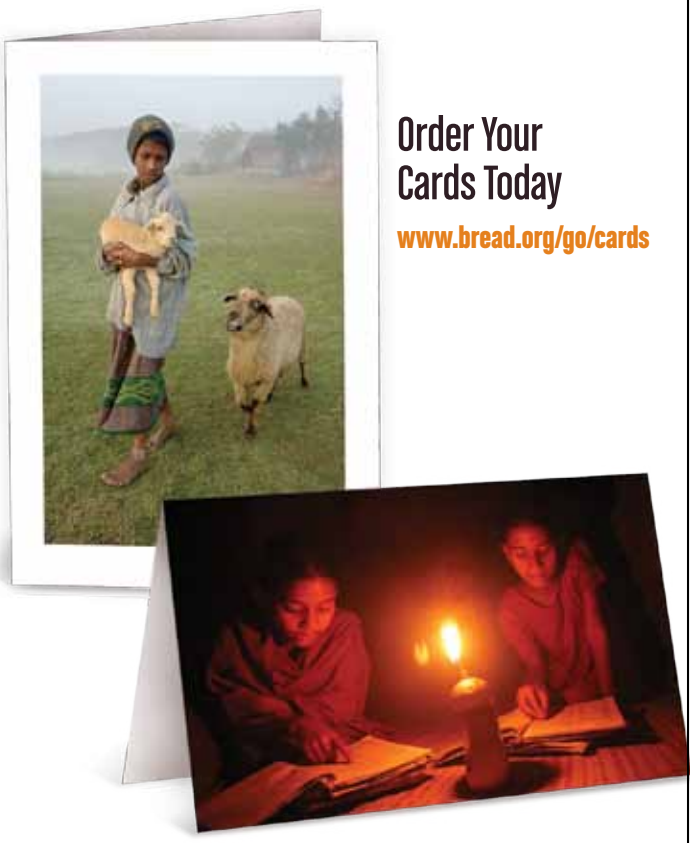

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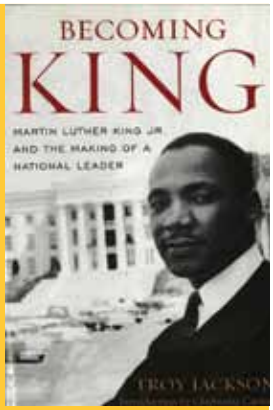
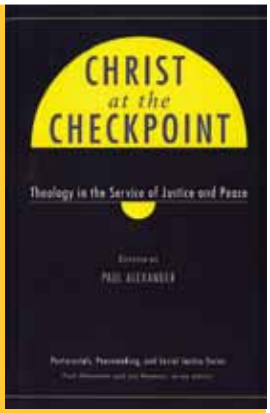


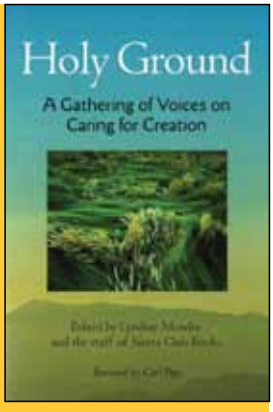

Martin Luther King Jr. is the face of the civil rights revolution that reshaped the social and political landscape of the United States. But few have recognized the pivotal role that the people of Montgomery, Ala., played in preparing him for leadership. It was there that brave citizens, both black and white, spearheaded a protest movement that also launched King's public ministry. This book highlights those formative years that gave MLK the skills and experience to become a hero to generations of Americans.

**CHRIST AT THE CHECKPOINT**
*Edited by Paul Alexander*




What do evangelical Christians in Palestine think about the land, the end times, the Holocaust, peace in the Middle East, loving enemies, Christian Zionism, the state of Israel, and the possibilities of a Palestinian state? This book focuses on presenting theological, biblical, and political perspectives and arguments from Palestinian evangelicals who are praying, hoping, and working for a just peace for both Israelis and Palestinians.

**HOLY GROUND**
*Edited by Lyndsay Moseley and the staff of Sierra Club Books*

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# THE GREAT AMERICAN WATER CRISIS

**Corporations are trying to buy up our water supply—and sell it back to us at a premium. Why it matters, and how consumer groups and faith communities are fighting back.**

*By* MAUDE BARLOW *and* WENONAH HAUTER

**CORPORATE RAIDER** T. Boone Pickens made billions as a Texas oil baron, but he's betting that the real money will come from mining "blue gold"—water. Pickens owns more water than anyone in the U.S.—he's already bought up the rights to drain 65 billion gallons a year from the Ogallala Aquifer, which holds the groundwater for much of the Great Plains. Almost all the Ogallala water—95 percent—is used for agriculture, but Pickens plans to pipe it down to Dallas, cashing in on the hotter-and-drier weather from climate change. (The result, according to an Agriculture Department spokesperson: "The Ogallala supply is going to run out and the Plains will become uneconomical to farm.")

Pickens isn't alone in his new role as a water baron. Multinationals such as Nestlé are buying up water rights, siphoning lakes, and selling our most precious resource to the highest bidder. Slick advertising has seduced many Americans into the mistaken belief that (expensive) bottled water is "purer" or "healthier" than tap water—and led to the annual consumption of 9.67 billion gallons of bottled water, with underserved Latinos and African Americans having the highest rates of bottled water use. And the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development warns that by 2030 nearly half of the world's population will inhabit areas with severe water stress.

As our authors explain, cities and towns across the country are in the midst of an epic fight to keep water as a public trust. Communities of faith have joined what they see as a battle for basic justice: Protecting the right of everyone, rich and poor alike, to the crucial stuff of life, water. **—The Editors**

Photo illustration by Benjamin Shearn

Nestlé chair Peter Brabeck-Letmathe

ARC Jean-Bernard Sieber

"Water is, of course, the most important raw material we have today in the world. It's a question of whether we should privatize the normal water supply for the population. And there are two different opinions on the matter. The one opinion, which I think is extreme, is represented by the NGOs, who bang on about declaring water a public right. That means that as a human being you should have a right to water. That's an extreme solution."

**—Peter Brabeck-Letmathe, chair of Nestlé, an international corporation aggressively pursuing water privatization**

**THE UNITED STATES** has one of the best public water supply systems in the world.

More than 250 million people count on local governments to provide safe drinking water. Over the last 40 years, federal, state, and municipal governments have worked together to improve and protect water resources. The Clean Water Act, the Safe Drinking Water Act, and the Endangered Species Act have kept the U.S. on target for preserving rivers, lakes, watersheds, wetlands, natural aquifers, and other sources of fresh water.

Great strides have been made in managing waste water and storm water. More than 90 percent of community water systems in 2012 met all federal health standards. Public water utilities have been a tremendously successful model for the U.S. and continue to keep drinking water safe, accessible, and affordable for all Americans.

It hasn't always been this way.

During the 1800s, private companies controlled the water systems of several large U.S. cities—to dire effect. Because the companies were more interested in making a profit than providing good service, many poor residents lacked access to water. As a result, cholera outbreaks were common in poor neighborhoods; water pressure was sometimes too low to stop fires, which destroyed both homes and businesses.

By the turn of the 20th century, city governments, including Baltimore, Boston, New Orleans, and New York City, had taken over drinking water provision from private companies. The goal of government was to improve service, reduce waterborne diseases, and increase water pressure to better fight fires. New York City, for example, assumed control of its drinking water services from the bank and holding company called the Manhattan Company, the predecessor of JPMorgan Chase, after an outbreak of cholera killed 3,500 people and a devastating fire caused extensive property damage.

These cities learned the hard way just how important public water provision is for human and environmental health. The shift to a public utility system, responsive to community needs, allowed local public control of water and sewer services. Public utilities helped local governments manage water resources, growth, and development and ensured that safe and reliable services were available to all.

NOW, JUST PAST the turn of the 21st century, our national water framework needs rethinking with climate change and sustainability in mind. It's time for an integrated, holistic national water policy, including the establishment of a federal water trust fund. Instead we face the cannibalization of our public utilities by private corporations.

Despite our success over the last 100 years, public water utilities face daunting challenges in the days ahead.

**1. Water systems nationwide are aging and wearing out.** This summer more than 150,000 residents in the greater Washington, D.C. region faced the specter of being without water for days because of a stuck valve on a major water main. Delayed maintenance on the valve due to funding cuts led to the crisis.

There are 237,600 water line-related breaks in the United States each year, resulting in $2.8 billion lost in potential revenue and tax dollars annually. An influx of money is needed for repairs and replacements to prevent leaks and to maintain reliable service. In total, U.S. drinking water systems will need $384 billion in improvements over the next 20 years to continue to provide safe water, according to the EPA.

**2. As water needs rise, federal funding dwindles.** With a U.S. population of more than 316 million, the need for clean water continues to grow. Yet water systems are among the first on the chopping block during congressional budget battles. From 1977 to 2009, federal funding for water and sewer systems fell by 75 percent (after accounting for inflation). Following a brief respite from the 2009 national stimulus, federal water funding continues its downward trajectory. Cuts in federal funding shift a greater financial burden to local governments. Local governments are still grappling with budget shortfalls carried over from the recession.

**3. Enter climate change into this equation.** Climate change may pose a serious risk to water supplies in about 70 percent of U.S. counties—a third of these counties will be at high or extreme risk of water shortages. Warmer temperatures worsen water pollution and cause more extreme weather events.

As we saw with Hurricane Sandy, extreme weather can destroy water facilities and infrastructure, with seawater seeping into reservoirs. Climate change will continue to stress water supplies and create water shortages.

But sustainable water management isn't just about our water infrastructure. Every well developed for fracking uses 3 to 5 million gallons of water as part of the process. According to some estimates, 20 percent of that water can be reused for more fracking, but 80 percent is highly salinized wastewater.

All these problems intersect to create the Great American Water Crisis.

WHENEVER A CRISIS arises there are those who battle it and, unfortunately, those who take advantage of it for personal gain. Private water corporations and investment banks once again are stepping in to take advantage of this crisis through takeovers and buyouts of public water systems. The aggressive strategy of private water utility companies in the last 10 years raises fears that the public may be losing control of its most vital resource.

These corporations work to undermine federal funding for public utilities, while seeking special tax benefits and government subsidies for themselves. They target local governments with offers of upfront cash in exchange for long-term control of water resources. Currently, about 12 percent of the U.S. population receives water service from privately owned community water systems. These private water providers, which include both nonprofit associations and for-profit companies, primarily serve subdivisions and areas outside municipal limits.

In many ways, water privatization can leave poor households high and dry. Private water utilities are businesses, and like any business they are accountable first and foremost to their owners. As a result, their primary objectives are often different than those of a local government, which is accountable to constituents and voters. This impacts decisions about where to extend service and the price and quality of that service.

As a matter of public policy, a city seeks to provide water service to every neighborhood within its borders and may aim to keep water rates as affordable as possible. Private companies, however, base their decisions on profitability. When they expand water service areas, they tend to exclude households with the greatest need. Private companies are prone to cherry-pick service areas to avoid low-income communities where low water use and frequent bill collection problems can hurt earnings. Instead, private companies may enter into deals with real estate developers to provide water service to new suburban developments, which can promote urban sprawl.

When private players take over public water systems, prices typically increase much faster than inflation. In general, compared to local governments, for-profit water utilities charge customers considerably higher prices. On average, private financing costs one-and-a-half to two-and-a-half times as much as public financing, translating into higher rates for consumers. A survey of the largest water utilities in the Great Lakes region, for example, found that privately owned systems charged households more than twice as much as municipal systems charged for the same amount of water. The researchers attributed this difference to private companies' profits, rate-making practices, higher overall service costs, and taxes.

Water prices are regressive. When households are unable to pay for service, private players usually respond by cutting existing connections. This deprives low-income households of their human right to water, with potentially disastrous health and social welfare consequences.

Privatization may also interfere with local government efforts to prepare for climate change and protect water supplies. Sustainable management of water resources requires coordination across government divisions and jurisdictions in a watershed, but private utilities have no incentive or requirement to participate in integrated water management programs. Private companies are in the business of making money, not delivering clean water at the lowest cost.

Despite these dangers, some local governments continue to fall prey to the quick-fix and budget gimmicks proffered by privatization advocates.

THE GOOD NEWS is that faith-based, consumer, labor, and other community

## Privatization poses a threat to human health.

## Elsewhere Around the World ...

**IN FRANCE,** about 70 percent of water services are privatized. French corporations continue to vie for control of the global water supply. But in 2010, **Paris**, in a case of "remunicipalization," exited contracts with Paris-based Veolia and Suez Environnement, the world's two largest water service companies.

Veolia is also the largest waste-water corporation in the world. Subsidiary Veolia Water North America is the largest private operator of U.S. municipal water and waste-water systems and controls the water service of about 14 million people.

The city of **Jakarta**, Indonesia, was recently confronted with a clean-water crisis as supplies run dry and a leaky system loses about 40 percent of its water. The city, with 10.9 million people, decided to buy back control of its water system in June from Suez Environnement.

In the Philippines, there is mounting public opposition to the private companies that control **Manila's** water systems. In July, the Water for All Refund Movement, a civil society group, asked the nation's supreme court to nullify water privatization deals and to declare them "unconstitutional and immoral." Since privatization in 1997, water rates have increased by amounts from 547 percent to 850 percent, while the private companies have seen ever-escalating profits.

Average water rates in Jakarta and Manila are among the highest of major cities in Asia.

In a world where 18 percent of the population lives on less than $1 a day, high water prices pose a real threat to human health, and privatization has escalated that threat around the globe.

**—MB and WH**

A placard used to organize against privatizing Allentown, Pa.'s water and sewer system.

organizations have teamed up to fend off many attempted takeovers to keep their water under local public control, for the health of the poorest and the strength of the whole community. A few examples:

**AKRON, OHIO.** In February 2008, Akron's Mayor Don Plusquellic ended his State of the City address with a proposal to lease the city's sewers to private interests under the guise of raising money for a scholarship program. Greg Coleridge, director of the Economic Justice and Empowerment Program at the Northeast Ohio American Friends Service Committee, responded quickly. He brought together stakeholders throughout the city to form a broad coalition of labor, faith, and community organizations known as Citizens to Save Our Sewers and Water, or Citizens SOS. (Food and Water Watch supported the campaign.)

Citizens SOS decided that the best way to counter the mayor's proposal was to require voter approval before the privatization of any public utility. To do this, they needed to pass a ballot referendum. They had to collect enough signatures to get their proposal on the November 2008 ballot, then educate voters about the issue.

In May 2008, Citizens SOS kick-started its petition drive with a community meeting attended by more than 150 people. With this auspicious beginning, they had no trouble collecting the necessary signatures to get their issue on the ballot. Next, Citizens SOS educated their constituency about privatization and countered Plusquellic's aggressive campaign promoting his own ballot initiative to authorize the lease.

On Election Day 2008, with a county-wide voter turnout of more than 70 percent, Akron overwhelmingly rejected privatization and overwhelmingly supported the public's right to have a voice in what happens to their utilities, by a margin of 2-to-1. "It's just a wonderful collective victory with so many people having a role that was so powerful," Coleridge told Food and Water Watch after the victory.

Unsportsmanlike in defeat, Mayor Plusquellic attacked Citizens SOS. "There will be a special place in hell reserved for those people who went out and misled the voters of Akron," he said. Citizens SOS responded. They knew the mayor's fondness for McDonald's. "To make him feel better," Coleridge told Food and Water Watch, "we sent him a Happy Meal with a note that said, 'There's a place in heaven for people who come together to work for scholarships without leasing public assets.'"

Plusquellic was not alone in his misguided quest to privatize public services. Fortunately, community groups continue to organize to keep their water in public hands.

**MILWAUKEE, WIS.** In 2008, the comptroller of Milwaukee suggested leasing its water utility to a corporation for 75 to 99 years in exchange for a one-time cash infusion to help fund city operations. By June 2009, a broad coalition named Keep Public Our Water (KPOW) helped shelve the lease of Milwaukee's water system.

**TRENTON, N.J.** In 2010, a Trenton community coalition beat back the proposed sale of part of their city's water system to American Water. A resounding 80 percent of voters rejected the deal, even though the water company spent more than $1 million to curry their favor, nearly 32 times as much as the stop-the-sale campaign. (Food and Water Watch aided the anti-sale efforts.)

**AROUND THE COUNTRY.** In 2011, community organizing stopped privatization deals in Franklin Township, N.J., and Muskogee, Okla. In 2012, the city council of Grand Island, Neb., unanimously rejected a waste-water privatization deal with Veolia Water because of public opposition. In 2013, residents of Bethel, Conn., soundly defeated a proposal to sell their water system to Aquarion Water Company. More than 70 percent of voters rejected the sale.

BECAUSE WATER IS fundamental to life and human dignity, the United Nations has recognized access to safe water and sanitation as a basic human right. Involving private enterprises in water operations can conflict with the human right to water. The faith community plays a key role in protecting this right and ensuring safe and reliable water for all, but especially for the poor and vulnerable. It is up to consumer groups, civil society, and faith communities to stop corporate takeovers of public water systems established for the common good to ensure universal access to safe water.

Together, we can protect our water supplies in the face of growing challenges. We can establish a federal water trust fund to provide dedicated monies for our water and sewer systems; we can ban fracking to protect our water resources; and we can enshrine the human right to water in federal and state law. Responsible public provision of our water and sewer services, along with these three policy steps, is the best way to safeguard water, uphold the human right to water, make sure that no one suffers from lack of this essential element, and move our country toward a sustainable integrated national water policy.

It is up to consumer groups, civil society, and faith communities to stop corporate takeovers of public water systems established for the common good.

Water is the lifeblood of our communities. It is essential for health and well-being. Its substance is beyond value and transcends the physical—it's sacred. Throughout scripture, water represents our spiritual life: "The angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city" (Revelation 22:1-2). Let us cherish—and protect—this precious resource. ■

***Maude Barlow*** *is co-founder of the Blue Planet Project and board chair of Food and Water Watch.* ***Wenonah Hauter*** *is executive director of Food and Water Watch.*

# 'Rev. Riverkeeper'

## One minister's effort to keep the Anacostia River "baptizable."

*by* DOTTIE YUNGER

**THE ANACOSTIA RIVER** is a river of contrasts. Often called "the nation's forgotten river," it flows for eight-and-a-half miles through some of the richest and poorest communities in and around D.C., through residential and industrial zones, through marshes and military installations. In fact, the federal government owns so much land in the watershed that when all those federal toilets flush during a heavy rain, they drain directly into the river.

The Anacostia River watershed is home to more than 800,000 people, 43 species of fish, and nearly 200 species of birds—including our nation's symbol, the bald eagle, and the majestic great blue heron. Yet the trash in the river is so deep and wide at times that you're just as likely to see a heron walking across a flotilla of trash rather than flying over the water.

As the Anacostia Riverkeeper—part of the Waterkeeper Alliance movement to protect local waterways—it was my job for three years to be the eyes, ears, and voice of its watershed. Of the nearly 200 waterkeepers worldwide, I was the only riverkeeper who was also a minister. I was called "Rev. Riverkeeper."

The antiquated sewer system that pumps more than 2 billion gallons of raw sewage, mixed with polluted runoff, into the river each year is not just a shame, it's a sin. African-American churches along the Anacostia used to baptize their members in the river. Nowadays, the river wouldn't wash away anyone's sins. My goal as Rev. Riverkeeper was an Anacostia that was not only "fishable" and "swimmable"—as required by the Clean Water Act—but also "baptizable."

THE ANACOSTIA RIVER is in desperate need of healing. "How has one river fallen so far from grace?" asked one community leader.

I've had a lot of time to reflect on this question—and on the "state of grace" of the more than 100,000 creeks, streams, and rivers in the broader Chesapeake Bay watershed (which includes the Anacostia)—in my work as executive director of the Interfaith Partners for the Chesapeake. In this capacity I worked with congregations of all spiritual traditions throughout the watershed. I carried that community leader's question to them, and we prayed together on how to care for creation, especially the waterway nearest to their house of worship.

One particularly effective Bible study with congregations was based on various verses from Psalms that refer to water. These verses (for example, Psalms 1:3; 68:6-9; 107:33-35) tell the story of how water works in creation and the different forms water takes. It's an amazing system. The cycle that water travels is as much God's creation as is the water itself. Generally speaking, the Earth has an established amount of water that has been cycling through phases and providing life since it was first established. The water celebrated by the psalmists is the same water we have today—literally. The waters of baptisms and ritual cleansings we use today are all part of the same body of water used by the prophets and Jesus. We are part of this cycle; this cycle is part of us. Yet we know this cycle is out of balance.

The psalmists' vision of how things should be is not how things are. Our actions (or inactions) are the direct cause. We experience flooding in some areas, drought in others. We build dams and levees to control the flow of water. We allow harmful chemicals to change the very nature of water. Water that used to flow gently over lush vegetation now roars harshly across asphalt into these waterways, carrying with it pollutants and eroding riverbanks. We seem to think we know better than God how water should be water.

That's the bad news. The good news is that we can help return the water cycle to its natural rhythm, as intended by God and described by the psalmists.

Last year, D.C.'s Washington City Church of the Brethren installed a bright red 650-gallon cistern on its property. The cistern was installed with youth community workers who live along the river's banks. Jointly organized by the church, the D.C. Department of the Environment, Anacostia Riverkeeper, and Groundwork Anacostia, this project provides free rainwater to the Capitol Hill community, prevents thousands of gallons of storm water from entering the river as polluted runoff, and lowers the church's water bill.

Once the cistern was installed, the church hosted a community celebration in which the cistern was christened and the water blessed. "We are blessed to share this water with our community," I said, "and hope that the blessing spreads through our community." With that, it began to rain. ■

Rev. Dottie Yunger, top, with a river turtle. Above, Washington City Church of the Brethren's new cistern.

Photos by Phil Yunger, top, and Rick Reinhard

***Dottie Yunger,*** *a Methodist pastor, is the former executive director of the Interfaith Partners for the Chesapeake. For more on your watershed, check out www.epa.gov/owow/surf.*

# A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT

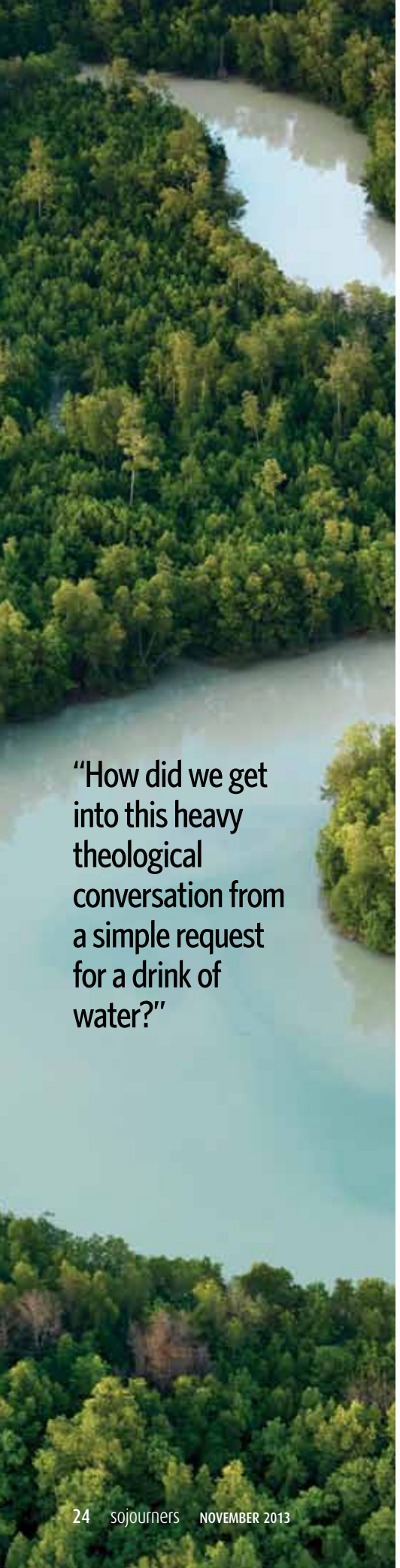
## Water in the New Testament

**BIBLE STUDY** • *by* RETA HALTEMAN FINGER

**"HOW DID THIS HAPPEN?"** pondered the middle-aged woman as she panted up the road to her village of Sychar, water jar forgotten. "How did we get into this heavy theological conversation from a simple request for a drink of water? Sometimes conversations take sharp turns, but this is just too bizarre. I've known a number of men in my life, but only the crazy ones told me they were the messiah! Better check this out with the town elders."

In contrast to the approximately 800 references to water in the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament is relatively spare. A friend explained the difference. The ancient Hebrews emerged from the eastern desert cultures of Egypt and Babylonia (now Iraq), which built their empires around rivers and where water was scarce and precious. But the New Testament writers were oriented toward the wetter West, where seafaring Greeks and Romans had appropriated the Mediterranean Sea as their major mode of transportation and conquest. For example, even though the book of Acts only mentions the word "water" in reference to baptism, the early missionary movement depended on travel by ship to spread the gospel message.

Grant Dixon



"How did we get into this heavy theological conversation from a simple request for a drink of water?"

**Water in the synoptic gospels**

All four gospels introduce us to John the Baptist down by the Jordan River, who dunks in its flowing water those who repent from sin as a symbol of their cleansing. After John moves offstage, the synoptic gospels center much of Jesus' activity in the towns around the Sea of Galilee. Here he not only teaches from a boat (Matthew 13:2; Luke 5:3), but he and his disciples travel in it from one side of the lake to the other, which includes a miraculous walk on and rebuking of the stormy waves (Matthew 14:22-27; Mark 6:47-52; Luke 8:22-25). Other references to water are few and sometimes incidental.

But both Mark and Luke include a curious reference to "a man carrying a jar of water" (Mark 14:13; Luke 22:10). Before his final Passover, Jesus instructs his disciples to follow this man to the house in Jerusalem where they are to request use of the upper room for Jesus to share Passover with them. The occurrence of a man doing women's work of fetching water must have been so rare in this large city that it could have meant only one of two things. Either this was a celibate Essene community of only men, who consequently had to do all the housekeeping; or it was a household of Jesus-followers whom he had already taught the importance of service beyond gender roles.

**The water of life in John's gospel**

But water, rich with symbolism, comes into its own in the fourth gospel. With 24 references in nine different episodes, we can "plunge in," as it were. For here Jesus himself is the water of life.

In John 1:29-34, Jesus comes to John at the Jordan River, as have many others. But what a difference! The text never says that John baptized Jesus. Rather than needing repentance, Jesus is hailed by John as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29). Then John testifies in verse 32, "I saw the Spirit descending on him like a dove, and it remained on him." Though the synoptics identify this event as happening at the moment of Jesus' water baptism, this writer cleverly avoids their embarrassing statements of Jesus receiving John's baptism of repentance along with everybody else.

In John 2:1-11, Jesus performs his "first sign" (2:11)—changing water into wine at the wedding in Cana. The symbolism of water here is startling. The huge stone jars Jesus asks the servants to fill with water are "for the Jewish rites of purification" (2:6), since only stone can remain ritually pure. By changing the water into wine, which belongs only in impure clay amphorae, Jesus in effect attacks the Jewish ritual purity system. No wonder the servants do not tell the steward where the wine came from! Jesus and the servants probably chuckle over their secret while the wedding guests imbibe what just moments ago was water for ritual cleansing.

**Breaking water at birth**

In John 3 we meet Nicodemus, a teacher in Israel who has observed Jesus' signs and can't figure him out. There is no water here, except in Jesus' use of the female image of birth. "To enter the realm where God dwells," says Jesus, "you must be born *anothen*" (3:3). This is a clever word play, where the Greek *anothen* can mean either "again" or "from above." Nicodemus chooses the common meaning, "again," and taunts Jesus by imagining a grown man emerging from his mother's womb. Jesus replies that to enter God's kingdom one must be "born of water and spirit" (3:5). This reference to water, I think, stands for the amniotic fluid that breaks out from the womb of the Spirit, our birthing Mother.

The most sustained use of water as reality and symbol occurs in John 4, in the longest theological conversation between two people in the entire New Testament. Most of us know something about "the woman at the well"—including, I hope, the racial overtones that echo our shameful U.S. Jim Crow laws. In John 4:7-9, she asks, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" But Jesus completely ignores both ethnic and gender barriers and teases her with a statement loaded with double meanings. "If you only knew who was asking you to give him a drink, you would have instead asked him for a drink of living water!"

Whatever "living water" means to us today, in that world it meant running water. In contrast to the still and often stale water of cisterns and wells, running water from rivers and springs was clean and fresh, as well as ritually pure. Was this odd Jewish gentleman, as verse 12 puts it, "greater than our ancestor Jacob who gave us the well?" But Jesus (in 4:14 and 7:37-39) promises living water that not only keeps the one who drinks it satisfied

but will become within her "a spring of water gushing up to eternal life"! The woman still operates on an earthly level: "Please give me this water so I won't have to keep coming here to draw water!" But eventually this ordinary Samaritan woman persists until she "gets it," in contrast to Nicodemus, the teacher in Israel, who doesn't.

**Dirty water becomes holy water**

After a visit to the pool of Bethsaida in Jerusalem, where Jesus' command (rather than the water) healed an invalid (5:1-9), we come to John 13:1-17, the turning point of the whole narrative. Ironically, it pivots not on a miraculous "sign," not on a lake or spring or pool—but on a basin of what will become very dirty water. In 13:1-5, Jesus knows that "his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father." So he strips down to the attire of a slave, picks up a towel, pours water into a basin, and washes the dirt-crusted, calloused feet of his disciples.

Though dramatic irony characterizes the whole of John's gospel, this example is so powerful it brings me to tears. In the middle of a narrative pervaded by the highest Christology, we find the "only begotten Son of God" kneeling before others to do scut work. Obviously there are no servants or wives present at this meal, or feet would have been washed before dinner. None of the men have stooped to wash even their own feet, so Jesus demonstrates to them the most radical characteristic of his New Community: love shown through menial service. It doesn't take much water to get the point across—only one basinful.

One last water example occurs in John 19:34, after Jesus has been "lifted up" on the cross (3:14; 12:32) as part of his ascent back to God. When a soldier pierces his side, blood and water come out, echoing the sign of water-turned-to-blood-red wine at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. The invitation to the water of life comes at the heavy cost of life itself.

**A river runs through it**

The final references to water are in the last book of the New Testament—the Apocalypse. Some images of judgment involve the poisoning of water (Revelation 8:10-11) or the drying up of the great river Euphrates (16:12)—reminding us of water contaminated through fracking or oil spills, or water fights in the U.S. Southwest over what's left of the Colorado River.

But ultimately beauty and abundance predominate. Although John's gospel and Revelation have different authors and writing styles, they converge on the image of living water. The Lamb will guide the multitudes from every nation to springs of the water of life (Revelation 7:17). The one who sits on the throne promises, "To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life" (Revelation 21:6).

This gift is for all who live in the New Jerusalem: "The angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city." This river is productive. "On either side of the river is the tree of life with its 12 kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations" (22:1-2). The vision of the future is solid and substantial. We will never outgrow our need for water.

**In the meantime, back to earthy affairs**

Was the Samaritan woman disappointed that Jesus did not magically provide a bubbling spring in her back yard to eliminate trips to the well? Some have suggested she was a social outcast because of her past history of five husbands (John 4:18) and because she came to the well at high noon to avoid other women (4:6). On the other hand, her conversation with Jesus portrays an intelligent, inquisitive woman with theological interests. And she was persuasive enough to bring many of her townspeople back to the well to meet Jesus and be persuaded to believe in him as the "savior of the world" (4:42).

Through this unexpected encounter, an unnamed woman not only found Jesus' internal living water, but she and her water jar were likely invited back into the community of women who gathered daily at the well in the cool of the morning. Part of her gift of living water may well have been a party line on the ancient equivalent of Sychar's telephone tree! ■

***Reta Halteman Finger,*** *who taught Bible at Messiah College in Grantham, Pa., is the author of* Roman House Churches for Today *and co-author of* Creating a Scene in Corinth: A Simulation *(2013).*

Water, rich with symbolism, comes into its own in the fourth gospel.

BY RYAN AHLGRIM
*Illustration by Ken Davis*

# HELP THOU MY UNBELIEF

## A pastor's journey of trust in the face of doubt.

**LAST YEAR** on NPR's "All Things Considered," I heard the story of Teresa MacBain, a United Methodist pastor who came to the conclusion she was an atheist. The situation was scary and awkward for her. Who could she tell? What would she do now for a living?

She wasn't trained for any other occupation, but neither could she continue her double life of preaching and public praying while knowing she didn't believe in any of it.

Lacking someone to confide in, MacBain secretly confessed to her iPhone, "Sometimes I think to myself: If I could just go back a few years and not ask

**"Everything is futile"—I could relate to that.**

the questions and just be one of the sheep and blindly follow and not know the truth, it would be so much easier. I'd just keep my job. But I can't do that. I know it's a lie. I know it's false." Eventually, she left the ministry.

As I listened to MacBain's interview, I empathized with her. After 30 years of serving as a Mennonite pastor, I often wonder whether I still believe the things I've always said I believed. My questions about God have become deeper, while my previous answers now sound shallow. The thought that I might not believe in God is frightening. It threatens my identity and worldview—not to mention my occupation. And yet I haven't arrived at MacBain's atheism. Instead, my doubts have been folded into my faith.

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When I was 16 years old and discovered that several of my school friends had become atheists, I was racked with questions about God's existence. I tried to resolve the issue by reading every book I could find on Christian apologetics. I piled up a mountain of highly dubious evidence and then spent the summer writing a 60-page defense of the Christian faith. But when I was finished, I made an awful discovery—I still had the same doubts. No amount of proof had made any difference at all.

I then came to the realization that my faith in God was not because of historical, scientific, or philosophical evidence, but because I experienced a relationship with God. Through prayer, Bible reading, corporate worship, the beauty of nature, and even my daily routines, I experienced life as meaningful, with a gracious presence behind it all. God was not an idea I intellectually came to believe in. Rather, God was that with whom I had a relationship of awe and reverence, the ground from which sprung my belief in love, goodness, and hope. This epiphany has stayed with me, but it has not resolved my doubts.

IN COLLEGE I took a keen interest in the relationship between science and religion—an area I have continued to study. But after decades of pondering these two different ways of engaging reality, I still have no satisfying way of melding them together. Science and religion may not be incompatible systems, but how can they come together to form one reality in a human being? I do not know.

My journey with doubt took a different turn after my mother died a few years ago. With a much sharper awareness of mortality, I couldn't escape the feeling that all of life is utterly pointless. It didn't matter what I did because eventually I would be dead, and all will ultimately be forgotten. It didn't matter what my children did or how I nurtured them or what would happen to them because they, too, will perish. Everything dies. An afterlife? Maybe, but I couldn't solve a host of logical questions. Life after death has more inner contradictions than time travel.

So it seemed I had to simply trust God that death and meaninglessness are not the end—but why would I make such an irrational leap? Yet, if there is no afterlife and all is doomed for death and nothingness, then

what's the point of God? Even if God exists, who cares?

I stewed with these questions for a long time, taking no real interest in anything—let alone my pastoral duties. I finally decided to preach a sermon series on Ecclesiastes. "Everything is futile" (Ecclesiastes 1:2)—I could relate to that. Wrestling with this book and turning those struggles into mes-

Time brought me back to life, soothing the doubts, though not removing them.

sages for my congregation helped me to more fully explore my angst over the vanity of all existence, and somehow this brought me some solace and even hope. I began to notice beauty and creativity again, as well as the gift of each moment. I allowed myself to enjoy these moments and cherish my family and friends. I eventually came to a place where I was simply grateful to be alive. Time brought me back to life, soothing the doubts, though not removing them.

Two Advents ago I preached a sermon about Zechariah, John the Baptist's father. I was struck by the contrast between Zechariah's and Mary's responses to an angelic message. He doubts, Mary believes. Mary is blessed for her belief, while Zechariah is struck mute for his doubt. I immediately identified with Zechariah—an older, experienced priest who, because of doubts about how God works, is unable to speak the right words.

I shared these observations with a small group of clergy friends over lunch one day. I told them I fantasize about starting a "Zechariah Club" for pastors who struggle with doubt. Most wanted to join.

So I empathize with Teresa MacBain, but I'm not an atheist. Even if I were an atheist, I think the last place I'd go to make that announcement would be where she went: an American Atheists convention. She tells about the tear-filled standing ovation she received, and I'm happy for her. But even if I were to conclude that there is no God, I'd still be deeply grateful for religious impulses and the healing communities of faith that often spring from them.


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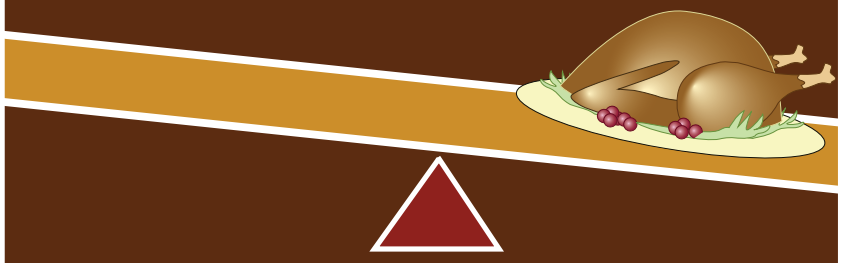

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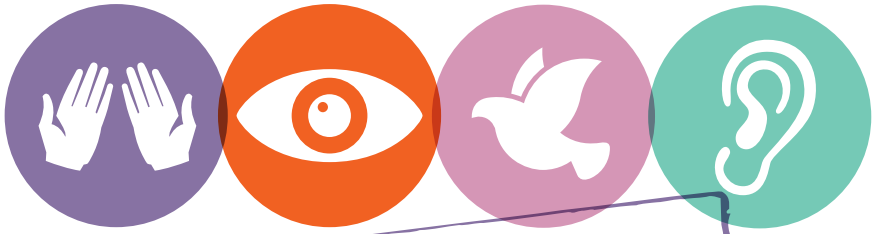


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Sometimes I imagine someone asking me if I believe in God, and I answer, "No, but I trust in God." The words "believe in" usually carry the connotation of having arrived at an intellectual conclusion. I have precious few logical reasons for believing in God. But, as I discovered long ago, God is a relationship.

I'm now learning to trust in God. For me this is the only way to live with hope, the only way to be fully human and reach our potential. We need to trust in order to love, to do justice, to selflessly give of ourselves for the benefit of others and the world.

**This wrestling with God is honest and useful, helping me to grow and mature.**

One of my favorite authors, A.N. Wilson, is an atheist—or at least he was. I recently discovered an article he wrote, "Why I Believe Again," that captures well my sense of reality, noting that "a life like Gandhi's, which was focused on God so deeply, reminded me of all the human qualities that have to be denied if you embrace the bleak, muddled creed of a materialist atheist. It is a bit like trying to assert that music is an aberration, and that although Bach and Beethoven are very impressive, one is better off without a musical sense."

I still wonder about God and always will. But I am more comfortable now with my doubts than I used to be. This wrestling with God is honest and useful, keeping my mind and awareness open, helping me to grow and mature. The Bible sometimes warns against doubt. However, its warnings are not aimed at intellectual limitations but at the failure to trust. God is an unsolvable puzzle, a mystery that I know I can never understand—but God is also the ground of my meaning and purpose. So I have decided to enjoy the journey, be grateful for the gift of life, follow Jesus, shepherd the flock God has given me—and, of course, trust. ■

***Ryan Ahlgrim,*** *lead pastor of First Mennonite Church in Indianapolis, is author of* Not as the Scribes: Jesus as a Model for Prophetic Preaching.

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BY ROBERT MANASTER

# Thou Who Art in Me

*And fallen, fallen light renew!*

—William Blake

Thou, this humid cloak at dusk, a blue
Air flattened, smoldering the same
Field for years. Oh, Thou—this hardened name
For You not joyously sprung, not grown to grace
Out of me: how to instill a tint
Of silver out from ash, a trace
Out, out from my cramped cell.
Renew our life, oh Thou! Wake, rise and glint
In me like extended wings slick with dew.
Be the pulse driven from a broken shell.

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***Robert Manaster's*** *poetry has appeared in numerous publications. He lives in Champaign, Ill.*

Photo by Jill Ferry

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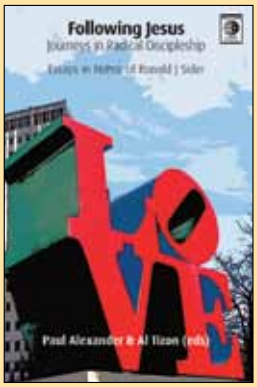


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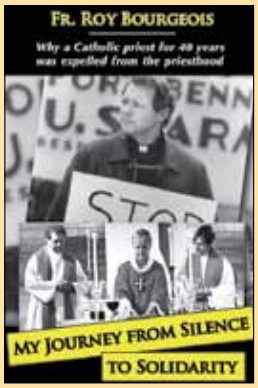


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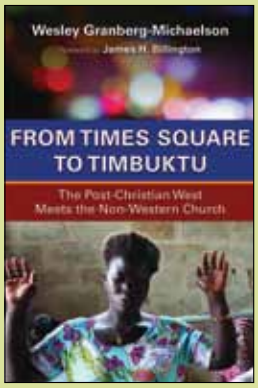


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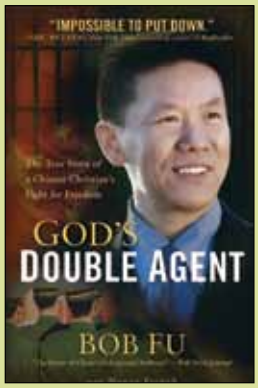


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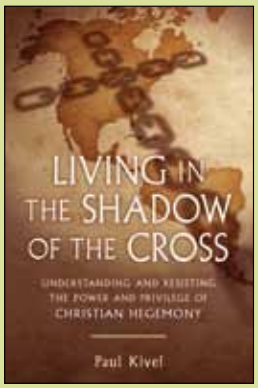


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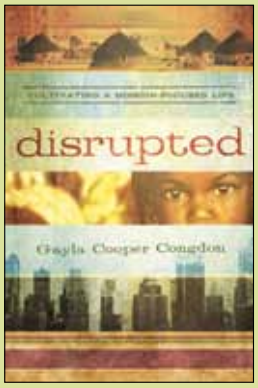


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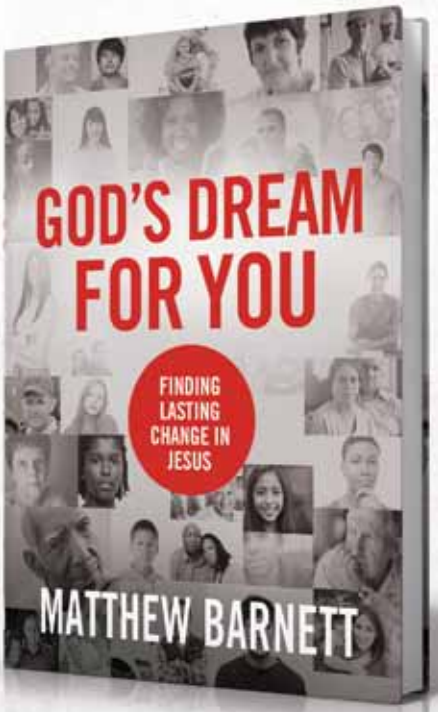


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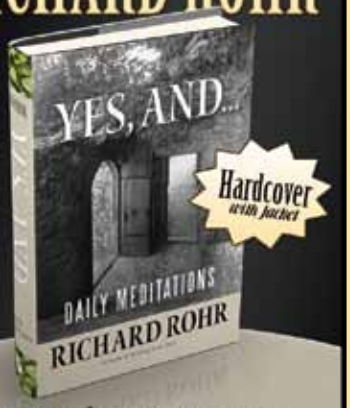


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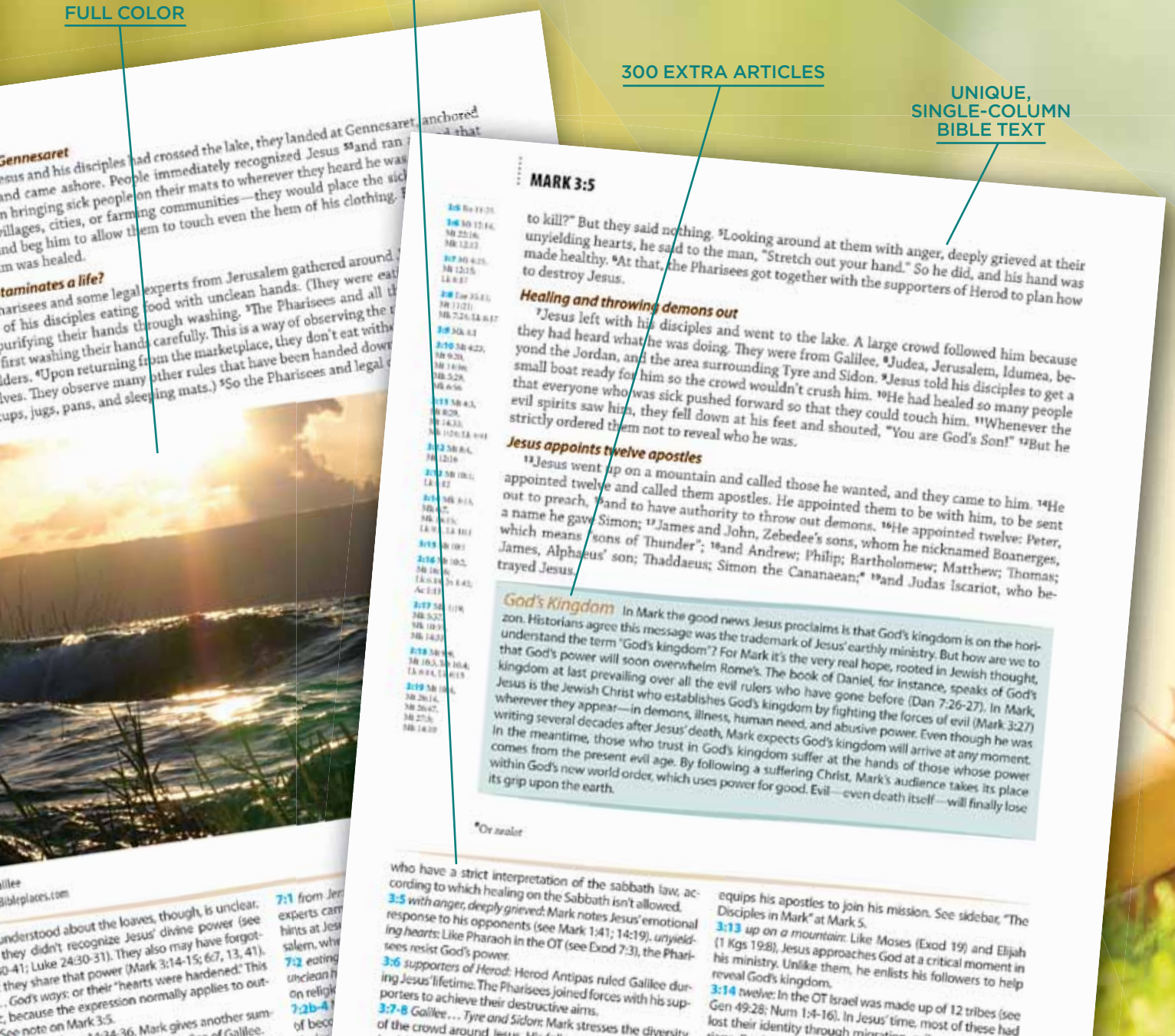

Gennesaret
esus and his disciples had crossed the lake, they landed at Gennesaret, anchored
nd came ashore. People immediately recognized Jesus [55]and ran
n bringing sick people on their mats to wherever they heard he was
illages, cities, or farming communities—they would place the sick
nd beg him to allow them to touch even the hem of his clothing.
m was healed.

taminates a life?
harisees and some legal experts from Jerusalem gathered around
of his disciples eating food with unclean hands. (They were eat
urifying their hands through washing. [3]The Pharisees and all th
first washing their hands carefully. This is a way of observing the
lders. [4]Upon returning from the marketplace, they don't eat with
lves. They observe many other rules that have been handed down
ups, jugs, pans, and sleeping mats.) [5]So the Pharisees and legal

MARK 3:5

to kill?" But they said nothing. [5]Looking around at them with anger, deeply grieved at their unyielding hearts, he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." So he did, and his hand was made healthy. [6]At that, the Pharisees got together with the supporters of Herod to plan how to destroy Jesus.

**Healing and throwing demons out**

[7]Jesus left with his disciples and went to the lake. A large crowd followed him because they had heard what he was doing. They were from Galilee, [8]Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, beyond the Jordan, and the area surrounding Tyre and Sidon. [9]Jesus told his disciples to get a small boat ready for him so the crowd wouldn't crush him. [10]He had healed so many people that everyone who was sick pushed forward so that they could touch him. [11]Whenever the evil spirits saw him, they fell down at his feet and shouted, "You are God's Son!" [12]But he strictly ordered them not to reveal who he was.

**Jesus appoints twelve apostles**

[13]Jesus went up on a mountain and called those he wanted, and they came to him. [14]He appointed twelve and called them apostles. He appointed them to be with him, to be sent out to preach, [15]and to have authority to throw out demons. [16]He appointed twelve: Peter, a name he gave Simon; [17]James and John, Zebedee's sons, whom he nicknamed Boanerges, which means "sons of Thunder"; [18]and Andrew; Philip; Bartholomew; Matthew; Thomas; James, Alphaeus' son; Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean;* [19]and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus.

**God's Kingdom** In Mark the good news Jesus proclaims is that God's kingdom is on the horizon. Historians agree this message was the trademark of Jesus' earthly ministry. But how are we to understand the term "God's kingdom"? For Mark it's the very real hope, rooted in Jewish thought, that God's power will soon overwhelm Rome's. The book of Daniel, for instance, speaks of God's kingdom at last prevailing over all the evil rulers who have gone before (Dan 7:26-27). In Mark, Jesus is the Jewish Christ who establishes God's kingdom by fighting the forces of evil (Mark 3:27) wherever they appear—in demons, illness, human need, and abusive power. Even though he was writing several decades after Jesus' death, Mark expects God's kingdom will arrive at any moment. In the meantime, those who trust in God's kingdom suffer at the hands of those whose power comes from the present evil age. By following a suffering Christ, Mark's audience takes its place within God's new world order, which uses power for good. Evil—even death itself—will finally lose its grip upon the earth.

*Or zealot

who have a strict interpretation of the sabbath law, according to which healing on the Sabbath isn't allowed.
**3:5** *with anger, deeply grieved:* Mark notes Jesus' emotional response to his opponents (see Mark 1:41; 14:19). *unyielding hearts:* Like Pharaoh in the OT (see Exod 7:3), the Pharisees resist God's power.
**3:6** *supporters of Herod:* Herod Antipas ruled Galilee during Jesus' lifetime. The Pharisees joined forces with his supporters to achieve their destructive aims.
**3:7-8** *Galilee . . . Tyre and Sidon:* Mark stresses the diversity of the crowd around Jesus.

equips his apostles to join his mission. See sidebar, "The Disciples in Mark" at Mark 5.
**3:13** *up on a mountain:* Like Moses (Exod 19) and Elijah (1 Kgs 19:8), Jesus approaches God at a critical moment in his ministry. Unlike them, he enlists his followers to help reveal God's kingdom.
**3:14** *twelve:* In the OT Israel was made up of 12 tribes (see Gen 49:28; Num 1:4-16). In Jesus' time, most of these had lost their identity through migration

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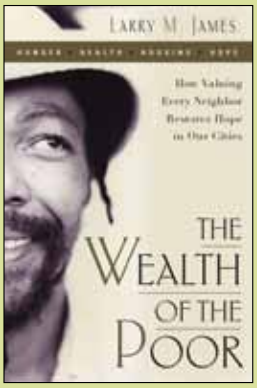


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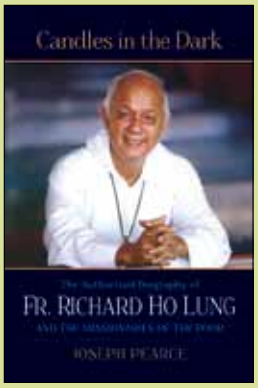


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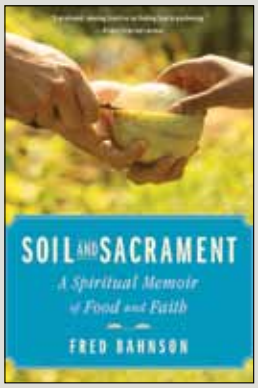


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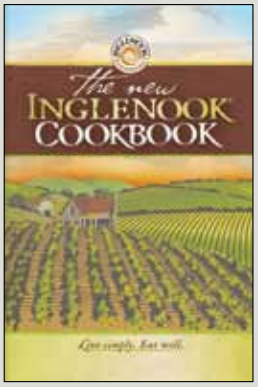


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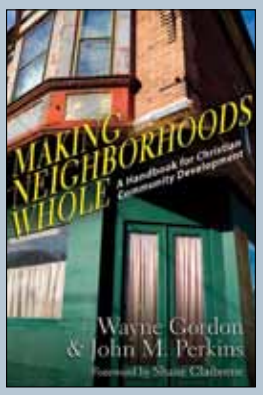


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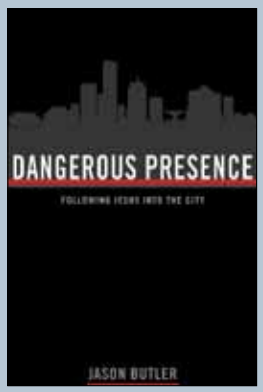


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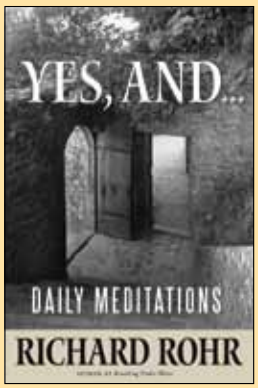


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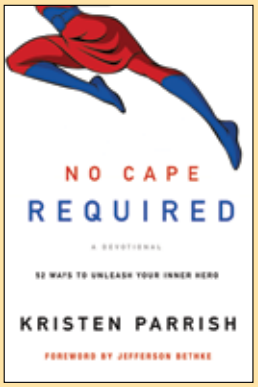


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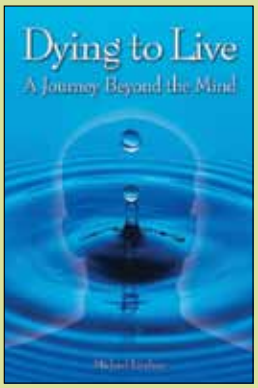


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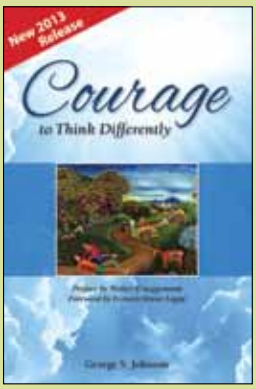


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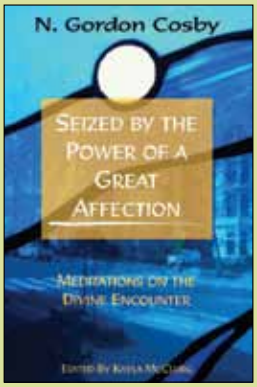


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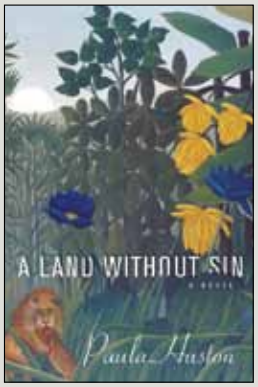


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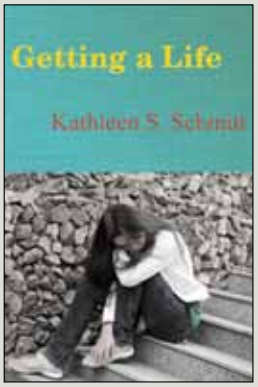


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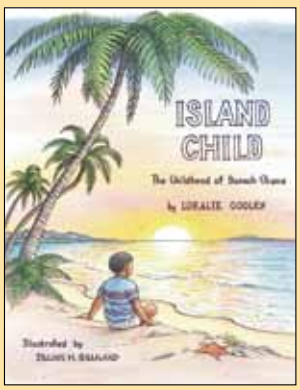


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An undersea prehistoric monster (above) from Pacific Rim, one of several would-be blockbuster films dealing with apocalypse. At right, Matt Damon stars in Elysium.

*By Kathryn Reklis*

# APOCALYPSE **REDUX**

**Why are blockbuster movies so bad at imagining life after the end of the world?**

**EVERY SUMMER** brings the end of the world. But not since 1998's *Deep Impact* and *Armageddon* both threatened the end of the world with objects from space has there been such apocalypse redundancy in summer blockbusters: This year, class wars, real wars, ecological exhaustion, aliens, and zombie viruses destroyed our planet in as many different ways.

In her excellent e-book *The Zombies are Coming!*, Kelly J. Baker reminds us that apocalyptic fantasies have been part of the popular American imagination since at least the Puritan hellfire sermon. Even without a common religious narrative to guide them, end-of-the-world stories mostly function as a form of cultural critique and utopian longing. We can only imagine a desired future out of the ashes of the utterly destroyed present. In other words, things are going

us a vision of how things might be different.

*After Earth*, for example, is more an overblown coming-of-age story than an apocalyptic thriller. The film follows Kitai (Jaden Smith) as he is guided via walkie-talkie by his wounded father (Will Smith) across an unknown planet. The planet turns out to be Earth 1,000 years after humans have high-tailed it to outer space. But since we never learn why humans had to leave, the apocalyptic frame feels like little more than an excuse to raise the stakes of Kitai's journey and a chance to show off some fantastic technology. Kitai's array of super-cool gadgets pretty much guarantees the creatures he meets will have to be more menacing than anything the old Earth could manufacture. The few glimpses we get of humanity's new planet suggest a post-racial melting pot where everyone speaks a little Chinese and a lot of English and has a preference for flowing linen garments and nautical decoration schemes. I suppose this is a vision of a better tomorrow, but it felt more like a futuristic Pier One ad.

*Oblivion* is better at imagining the end of the world than *After Earth*, though also more nostalgic in proposing a new future. The film follows two techies, Jack Harper (Tom Cruise) and Victoria "Vika" Olsen (Andrea Riseborough), after all the other humans

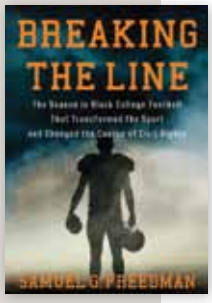
Continued on Page 41

to have to get a lot worse before they get better.

If Baker is right that we seize on apocalyptic fantasies both to express a deep feeling that something is very wrong with our current state of affairs and to imagine some better alternative, then this summer's world-ending movies display a profound lack of imagination. Most of them are not even particularly good at conceiving the end of the world, and none of them offer

## New & Noteworthy

### CLEATS AND DIGNITY




The civil rights struggle for African Americans happened in every sphere of life. *Breaking the Line: The Season in Black College Football That Transformed the Sport and Changed the Course of Civil Rights*, by Samuel G. Freedman, tells of two great black coaches in the tense year of 1967. Simon & Schuster

### CATCHING FIRE

One project of the USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture is the Pentecostal and Charismatic Research Initiative, which funded research in more than 20 countries. PCRI resources include the informative recent report, "Moved by the Spirit: Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in the Global South." crcc.usc.edu/pcri

### HOPE AND HEALING

The documentary film *The Adventists 2* looks at health care in the developing world and Seventh-day Adventist medical missions in Haiti, the Amazon, Malawi, China, Peru, and the Dominican Republic. A sequel to the award-winning film *The Adventists*, which looked at the body-mind-spirit connections of Adventists. journeyfilms.com

### A LIGHT FOR THE WORLD

Get international and justice-minded perspectives on the Sunday scripture readings from Catholic sisters, priests, brothers, and lay missioners in *A Maryknoll Liturgical Year: Reflections on the Readings for Year A*, edited by Judy Coode and Kathy McNeely. Orbis

BY DANNY DUNCAN COLLUM

# Learning from the Unspeakable

**NOVEMBER MARKS** the 50th anniversary of the assassination of our 35th president, an event that defined the life of the baby-boomers—a generation that, by sheer force of numbers, still sucks up most of the oxygen in U.S. culture. There are new books, reissued books, documentaries, made-for-TV movies, and a new Hollywood production, *Parkland*, starring that Everyman of the baby boom, Tom Hanks. But, anniversary hoopla aside, the JFK assassination and its aftermath can also provide us with some very timely lessons about the dangers that come with secret wars and unaccountable power.

Fifty-nine percent of Americans don't believe the official story that Lee Harvey Oswald alone killed President John F. Kennedy, and this time the majority is right. The available evidence strongly suggests that the president was the victim of a murder plot that involved anti-Castro Cubans, enraged by his failure to back them up during the Bay of Pigs invasion, and their allies in organized crime who had been heavily invested in pre-Castro Havana. That was the conclusion of the House Select Committee on Assassinations in 1978, which also found physical evidence of another shooter at the crime scene.

JFK's assassination provides us with lessons about the dangers of secret wars and unaccountable power.

Of course, the armed anti-Castro forces in Florida were a bought-and-paid-for creation of our CIA, and the CIA was also working with organized crime figures in various plots to assassinate Castro. So it's no great leap to suspect some complicity in Kennedy's assassination by CIA employees.

Lone gunman? President and Jacqueline Kennedy, minutes before the assassination.

Archive photo

Some reasonable people, including peace activist and theologian James W. Douglass in his book *JFK and the Unspeakable*, have gone further, claiming that the Kennedy assassination was the result of a policy decision, taken at the very highest levels of the national security state, aimed at heading off JFK's plans to pull out of Vietnam and end the Cold War. This theory relies heavily on National Security Action Memorandum 263, which laid out plans to begin withdrawing troops from Vietnam, and journalist Norman Cousins' account of back channel diplomacy in the book, *The Improbable Triumvirate: John F. Kennedy, Pope John, Nikita Khrushchev*.

Oliver Stone's 1991 classic *JFK* also indicted the national security establishment. As a result of that film, Congress passed the President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act of 1992, which established a commission to oversee the declassification of government documents relevant to the assassination. That law resulted in a torrent of paper that researchers are still combing through. But according to the Associated Press, the CIA is still holding on to 1,100 files "that are considered to contain information about confidential sources or methods or have national security implications."

What could possibly still have "national security implications" 50 years after the assassination and more than 20 years after the end of the Cold War? Well, apparently, anything related to a gentleman named George Joannides, for one. Joannides has been dead since 1990, but in 1963 he was director of psychological warfare for the CIA station in Miami. Then, in 1978, he was named to serve as liaison between the CIA and the House Select Committee on Assassinations. Journalist Jefferson Morley, a former *Washington Post* reporter and curator of the web site JFKFacts.org, is suing to open up the files on Joannides, and the CIA, for some reason, is fighting him hammer and tong.

The government's ongoing half-century cover-up on the JFK assassination may be designed to conceal the fact that a secret, undeclared war against a small neighbor went badly awry, and U.S. officials were partly responsible. But if Douglass is right, we have much deeper, systemic problems. In either case we ought to know, and as citizens we have a duty to find out. ■

***Danny Duncan Collum**, author of the novel* White Boy, *teaches writing at Kentucky State University in Frankfort.*

Continued from Page 39

leave Earth for Titan, one of the moons of Saturn. Jack and Vika have been left behind to look after the drones that maintain a deep-sea energy operation. While this sounds like thankless work, Jack and Vika move through their mission with the ease that gleaming technology and well-tailored clothing afford.

As the film unfolded, I couldn't help but wonder how humans had managed to build high-tech bunkers, drones, and ocean-borne power stations while also finding a way to terraform Titan and transport the remaining humans there, all while fighting aliens. It turns out these are the questions Jack and Vika should have been asking. Suffice it to say the battle with the aliens is far from over and Jack becomes a heroic figure in a band of revolutionaries. A lot is made of the importance of human memory in this post-apocalypse: The life we lost will never be completely gone so long as someone can remember it. Humanity's future hope involves a forswearing of fancy technology and a return to the earth. But this simpler life requires a radical reduction of the Earth's population down to a few, mostly white, inhabitants. If aliens kill off the teeming masses, the film suggests, Tom Cruise's memories and gene pool would make a pretty good new start.

> I suppose this is a vision of a better tomorrow, but it felt more like a futuristic Pier One ad.

Lacking aliens to clean up the mess of overpopulation and environmental degradation, the rich and beautiful skip town, or rather skip the entire planet, in *Elysium*. This isn't really a movie about the end of the world, because, in fact, Earth continues to truck along, one giant ethnically mixed slum, while the wealthy live in an orbiting space station, the ultimate gated community. If the future will have a slight Asian bent in *After Earth*, the Los Angeles of 2154 is a Spanglish ghetto, where everyone is some shade of brown except Max Da Costa (Matt Damon).

*Elysium* has been praised for combining

## ONFILM

BY GARETH HIGGINS

A scene from Lee Daniels' The Butler.

# COMPLEXITIES OF STRUGGLE **AND LOVE**

**LEE DANIELS' The Butler,** a century-spanning tale of race in the United States and service in the White House, is a dream of a film—by turns historically realistic and magically fable-like. It's a perfect companion piece to last year's *Django Unchained*, in that case a movie whose tastelessness wrapped up as fabulous entertainment forced audiences to engage with a deeper level of the shadow of U.S. history.

Based on the story of Eugene Allen, a black man who served multiple presidents in a White House that took its own time to desegregate its economic policies for domestic staff, *The Butler* begins with a rape and a murder of plantation workers by the son of the boss. The ethical quality of the film is immediately apparent. This horror is not played for sentiment, nor even spectacle, but to evoke the very ordinariness of monstrosity.

This makes *The Butler* a rare film: one more interested in confronting us with a kind of previously unspoken truth than in goading us to feel the catharsis of guilt-salving by association. (It's the antithesis of films such as *Mississippi Burning*, which use white protagonists to tell black stories and appear to believe that we can somehow participate in the virtue of the civil rights movement just by watching a movie about it.) The makers of *The Butler* have told a kind of truth about the struggle for "beloved community" that has rarely been seen so clearly on multiplex screens. The film illustrates the serious and painful work of nonviolence and invites us to consider the political and cultural tensions within the black freedom struggle, while giving a more humane perspective on the presidency than is often the case. We can hope the door is now open to more reflective cinema about the unfinished business of the black civil rights movement, broken relationships, traumatic memory, and how we tell the story of who we are.

Another film with service at its narrative core was recently re-released on Criterion Collection DVD/Blu-ray—the Danish parable **Babette's Feast**, in which the sacrament of eating together in community becomes a means of grace. The religious adherents on the island where Babette lives don't know what the sacred text is for. The mirror Babette furnishes for them lets their reflections become a holy gaze. Through the eyes of the other, people who have long since confused the letter of the law with its spirit become what they were made to be: lovers of life. Watching the film does that for audiences too. ■

***Gareth Higgins** is a* Sojourners *contributing editor and executive director of the Wild Goose Festival. Originally from Northern Ireland, he lives in Asheville, N.C.*

A scene from the apocalyptic buddy movie This Is The End.

a strident social critique with high-thrills blockbuster fun. The director, Neill Blomkamp, who also directed the 2009 apartheid parable *District 9*, has been clear that his film is not trying to imagine some future dystopia but paint in starker light the world as it currently is. The 1 percent may not orbit the Earth in a space colony, but their access to health care, security, and luxury seems as far away to most of the world's current population.

But *Elysium* can't decide who the target of its criticism is—the wealthy themselves? The structures that create such disparity? The deregulation of basic human services such as health care and public safety? In the end, the film blames an individual: *Elysium*'s secretary of defense, Jessica Delacourt (Jodie Foster). While the rest of *Elysium*'s ministers want to have their cake and eat it too, Delacourt polices *Elysium*'s pristine borders with pre-emptive strikes and merciless immigration policies. It is easy to see the parallels with present social ills, but since in real life there is no Delacourt to target for revolutionary action, the critique loses its sting and the fantasy falls flat.

At least for a moment in *Pacific Rim*, I could grasp the fantasy at work. As the Kaijus (alien beasts from another dimension) fight the Jaegers (giant machines humans built to defeat the Kaijus), a giant monster tail crashes through a high-rise office building in Hong Kong, and cubicle after cubicle is smashed to smithereens. Well that, I thought, would certainly break up the monotony of the workday. At least the film grasped the cathartic pleasure that can come from watching the

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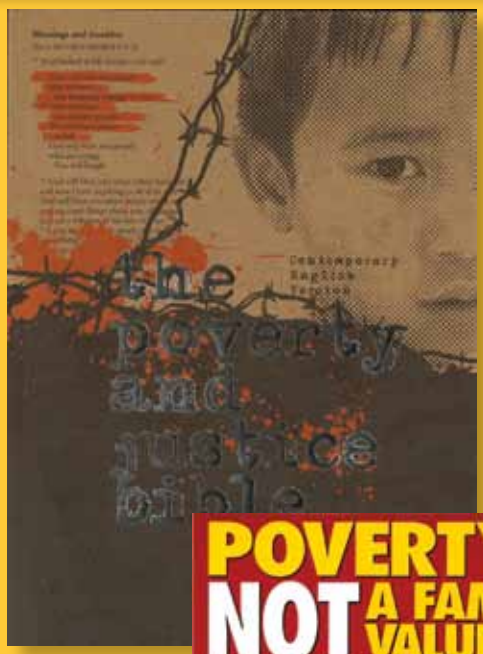


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infrastructure of modern urban life reduced to ash and crumpled steel. The film, however, doesn't stick around long enough to decide what should be built in its place.

This is really the problem with all of these movies. Apocalypse is just a narrative device or an excuse for better special effects or a diffuse social commentary that can't find its mark. In the end, the more things are destroyed, the more they remain the same: the same father-son tensions, the same myth of a lone hero riding in to save the world, the same recycled love story. Maybe there is a kind of comfort in this: No matter how bad things get, human nature will keep repeating itself. But given the collective sense that things are not right with the world as it is, that is a cold kind of comfort, and not a very inspiring reason to keep imagining the end of the world.

Cultural critic and philosopher Slavoj Žižek once quipped that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine a more modest change in capitalism. One doesn't have to think that capitalism is the root cause of our social unrest to take his larger point. Even in our most escapist fantasies—where, really, anything should be possible—we cannot imagine an alternative to the current state of things. At best these films gesture to it—We all wear linen! We live on another planet! But this crop of directors is too uncertain of what should lie beneath that bright new surface to show us the close-up. We have gotten so good at imagining the mechanics of complete destruction—bigger alien monsters, strange viruses, supernatural forces—we have lost any collective vision of what we'd hope to build out of the ashes of our demise.

A few recent movies have tried to imagine a solution to our own destruction. *Warm Bodies* (think Romeo and Juliet with zombies) suggests that what led to the zombie apocalypse was self-centeredness and what will undo it is human connection and kindness. Even *This Is the End*, the crudely hilarious bromance that gently mocks our obsession with apocalypse movies, has a moral lesson to teach: Looking out for a buddy might not prevent the end of the world, but it will keep you on the right side of the rapture.

My favorite apocalyptic movies are those that drop us squarely in the post-apocalyptic future: *The Road, Children of Men*, and the AMC television show *The Walking Dead* do this superlatively. In these films, virtually no time is spent on the spectacle of destruction; civilization has already been destroyed (even if lingering zombies or cannibals or militaries continue to threaten violence). We may not see a full-fledged vision of a better future in these fantasies, but our sense of what should survive the end of the world is sharpened—small acts of kindness and bravery as well as ways to imagine community when our current configurations of "family" and "country" no longer make sense.

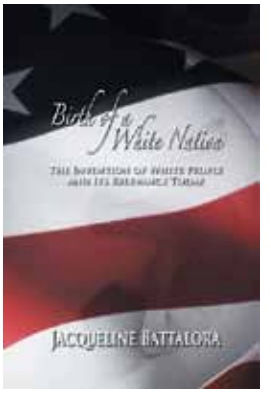
In the end, none of these fantasies meets Žižek's test: We can't imagine a way out of our worst problems without destroying the world to get there. But if we must have an apocalypse, it is worth asking what would happen if one of these movies lingered a bit longer after the end of the world. Now what? Who governs this new world? How do we arrange our common life? Maybe if Matt Damon or Will Smith invented a super technology that distributes health care and leads to farming collectives, it could even be a blockbuster. It might at least do our fantasy lives some good if we could imagine a new order to things, instead of just another way to destroy what we've got. ■

***Kathryn Reklis*** *is assistant professor of modern Protestant theology at Fordham University. She writes regularly on religion and pop culture at www.themothchase.com.*

*Reviewed by Rosemary Radford Ruether*

# COLORING IN **OPPRESSION**

**Birth of a White Nation: The Invention of White People and its Relevance Today, by Jacqueline Battalora. Strategic Book Publishing.**




**THIS SHORT VOLUME** by Jacqueline Battalora, a professor of criminal justice at St. Xavier University in Chicago, addresses a very important topic in American history and society: The legal, social, and political invention of the category of "white people" as a privileged group, which defines them as the normative Americans over against others, variously defined as "black," "colored," "Indians," and "mulatto."

When English settlers founded the New England colonies, they referred to themselves as British. As more people from other countries of Western Europe arrived in the area, they tended to group those they saw as similar to themselves as Christians, Germans, etc.—the term "white" was not used—over against "Negroes," Indians, and rival colonizers such as the Spanish and French.

The term white was first used in colonial law after Bacon's Rebellion in 1676, during which some African and European indentured servants formed an alliance. Virginia's colonial leaders responded with a package of laws that created a racial caste of African-descended slaves, distinguished from European servants. These laws decreed that African slaves could not be freed and free Africans could not hold office, serve in the army, or hold European bond laborers. This group was thus disprivileged, in contrast with those of European descent who were defined as "white."

The term white also soon appeared in Maryland colonial law, forbidding African-descended people from owning weapons and testifying against "whites." Anti-miscegenation laws also developed, forbidding "white" people from marrying those who were "black" or "Indian," fining them if they did so and taking away any children from such unions, who were labeled "abominations." These laws actually only applied to "white" women, since "white" men often had concubines from these forbidden groups without penalty.

When the colonies formed into the United States, the category called white passed into federal law, defining who could immigrate into this country and who could become citizens. Decreeing that only "whites" could become citizens created various conflicts in

the course of immigration history.

The U.S. seized northern Mexico after the Mexican-American War in 1848. To assure Mexico that its citizens in areas taken into the U.S. would be well treated, the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo decreed that these Mexicans could choose to become U.S. citizens and would thereby be defined as white. Many of these Mexicans had Indian and African ancestors; in the states that formed in this region, leaders who wanted to deprive Mexicans of their land shaped state laws to ignore the treaty and refuse them classification as white.

"Whiteness" worked in a different way for Irish people emigrating to East Coast areas in the 1830s. British and Anglo-Saxon American elites had defined Celtic people as "nonwhite" at that time. Some Irish immigrants were disposed to side with abolitionism against slavery. But Irish workers in American cities often found themselves as rivals of free blacks for the same jobs. By identifying with the Democratic Party and its doctrine of white supremacy, the Irish were able to win against their ethnic rivals and come to be defined as white in U.S. law.

Battalora details how the categorization of diverse groups of people as white or nonwhite has not only deeply shaped U.S. law and politics but also the ethnic identity of those thus defined. Although some of the discrimination against non-whites has been eased in U.S. law since the 1950s, these concepts continue to shape our identities as Americans. Every day "whites" and "non-whites" experience different treatment at the hands of the police and other authorities as they are perceived to belong to one or the other group. Battalora calls us all to continue the work of dismantling these divisive ways of separating us from each other as human beings. ■

***Rosemary Radford Ruether** is a visiting professor of feminist theology at Claremont School of Theology. She is the author of 46 books.*

*Reviewed by Duane Shank*

# FIELDS OF FAITH AND **DOUBT**

**Baseball as a Road to God, by John Sexton. Gotham Books.**

**IN MY MEMORY** from nearly 50 years ago, the great pitcher Sandy Koufax is going against my Phillies in the old Connie Mack Stadium in Philadelphia. The records show that such a game occurred on June 4, 1964, the right year for my memory, so it is possibly correct. But I cannot prove I was there that day, nor can anyone prove I wasn't. For me, it has entered the realm of myth—I may not actually have been there, but in my memory I believe I was. In a similar manner in religious experience, historical events originally recorded as perhaps inexact memories come to be believed as literal truths.

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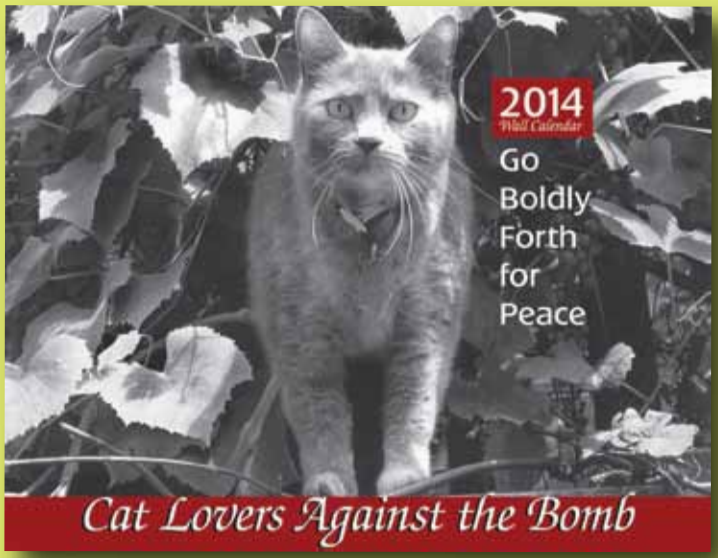

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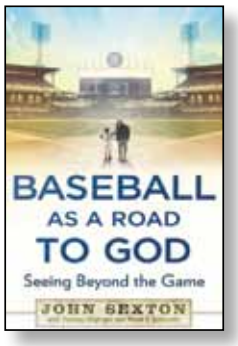
In *Baseball as a Road to God*, John Sexton uses the categories of the study of religion to explore the meaning of baseball. Sexton, president of New York University, has taught a popular seminar on this topic for more than 10 years, and in this book collects the essence of those classes.

For a baseball fan, the well-told stories of historic players, games, and seasons are by themselves worth reading and will evoke many memories. But rather than a random collection of stories, Sexton groups them in topics—sacred place and time, faith and doubt, conversion and miracles, blessings and curses, saints and sinners—illustrating each with fitting examples. Underlying it all, he proposes, are two words and concepts that link baseball and religion. Both illustrate the significance of the ineffable, "that which we know through experience rather than through study, that which ultimately is indescribable in words yet is palpable and real." And both have moments of hierophany—a term devised by religious historian Mircea Eliade to signify "a moment of spiritual epiphany and connection to a transcendent plane," a "manifestation of the sacred in ordinary life."




Sharing those moments with others builds a reality of community that can transcend the usual boundaries. Like a gathered religious congregation, the shared baseball experiences of faith and doubt, miracle comeback wins, gathering together in a "green cathedral"—all bring people together in ways that have become too uncommon in our individualized society. From the intimate experience of a parent and child to the national attention paid to a World Series, there is a unity of wonder and, at times, even reverence toward what is unfolding.

Finally, writes Sexton, "Baseball offers a window into the nature of faith, even in the deepest meanings of the word—as a source of comfort, of motivation, of understanding, and above all of meaning and ultimate purpose. There are moments when baseball can lift us from the ordinary to a different plane. ... We can learn, through baseball, to experience life more deeply. By embracing the ineffable joys of the 'green fields of the mind,' we can enlarge our capacity to embrace the ineffable more generally. Baseball can teach us that living simultaneously the life of faith and the life of the mind is possible, even fun."

To someone who is not a baseball fan, those statements will likely seem incomprehensible. But to a fan, they are a profession of faith, to which I can only add "Amen." ■

***Duane Shank** is an associate editor of* Sojourners.

Rick Reinhard

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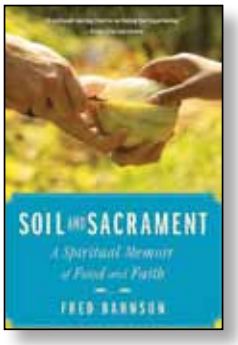
*Reviewed by Andrea Ferich*

# SPIRITUAL **CULTIVATION**

**Soil and Sacrament: A Spiritual Memoir of Food and Faith, by Fred Bahnson. Simon & Schuster.**

***SOIL AND SACRAMENT*** is Fred Bahnson's story of finding God through sustainable farming. A trained theologian, he learns to best live out his faith with shovel in hand, practicing a method of permanent agricultural design principles called "permaculture."

We follow him through the liturgical year on an agrarian pilgrimage from one faith community to another, digging into the big question of how to best love his neighbor. His answers are uncovered through building relationships and healthier soil, communing with others and his Creator in the field. From jail cell to monastic cell, from a rooftop in Chiapas to his four-season greenhouse, Bahnson finds the intersection of community and solitude between the field rows. Just like the first Adam from the *adamah* (earth), we learn how to give more to the soil than we take away and to reverently observe the garden as fruitful and multiplying. "Human from humus"—he had me at *hugelkultur*. (Look it up—it's really cool.)




Bahnson begins his pilgrimage in a Trappist monastery in South Carolina during Advent, joining the brothers in prayer and mushroom-growing practices, entering the dark cold winter silence of vigils and the soil. Bahnson then flashes back to 2001, to Holy Week in Chiapas with a Christian Peacemaker Team accompanying the Mayan Christian pacifist civic group Las Abejas—"The Bees." In Chiapas we sit and eat with Bahnson on Maundy Thursday, corn tortillas and slow-cooked black beans made into holy elements, partaking of an "ancient and unnamed liturgy," eating our way into mystery. Bahson ordains the creatures of the earth as perennial ministers of the soil, notes the transubstantiation of seed and potluck as Eucharist. He writes of beginning to think of growing food as the embodiment of loving his neighbors, the journey of the liturgical calendar through the mystery of soil. The book is a slow dance, a cosmic one-turn around the sun.

I could imagine the ways of the earthy Jewish Jesus from Bahnson's visit to the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center during the festival of Sukkot. Jewish environmental leader Nigel Savage tells Bahnson the center is "a postmodern Jewish *shtetl*," a living taproot for faith-based food system justice mandates, prayers, and traditions. Through this book one can see a Jesus who brought healing "from the land into people through the media of soil, water, saliva, bread, fish," a Christ child birthing from farm workers' resistance and the Promised Land.

Bahnson's eco-liturgical journey traverses tens of thousands of years of tillage traditions and 450 million years of soil. True to both his theology and permaculture principles, he is focused on relationships. He beautifully quotes spiritual cultivators and practitioners of permaculture, in a way that flows more like conversations with Thomas Merton, Wendell Berry, Ellen Davis, Eliot Coleman, and Norman Wirzba. Bahnson's story is a field song of *avodah*, "work as worship," *ora et labora* ("pray and work"), and the growing of food as "the embodiment of prayer."

*Soil and Sacrament* is the story of communion with the Divine, the land, and one another—it is loving our neighbors, the truest sense of the Body. This book inspired me to grow healthier soil, seek the margins, and love my neighbors at the intersection of field and sanctuary. "This is my body. This is the work of human hands. Corn grown and soaked in lime and ground into *masa*, baked on an oil drum lid, broken for you." ■

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***Andrea Ferich,*** *a contributor to the new book* Bury the Dead: Stories of Death and Dying, Resistance and Discipleship, *is founder of Eve's Garden in Camden, N.J., and executive director of the Penns Valley Conservation Association.*

BY ROSE MARIE BERGER

# Unlawful Entry

**OFFICER MARIO** normally worked for Homeland Security. On this Friday night he'd been seconded to the Washington, D.C. Metro police, who had their hands full. Not only did they have the usual "drunk and disorderlies," but now 54 people who looked like card-carrying members of the AARP were filling up their holding cells. Officer Mario, of retirement age himself, was feeling fortunate. He'd been assigned to the women's side.

"Ladies, ladies, ladies!" Mario said, sauntering in with a mischievous smile. "This must be my lucky night."

The evening before, we'd all been at St. Stephen and the Incarnation Episcopal Church running role plays on how to "flash mob" the corporate headquarters of Environmental Resources Management (ERM), the firm hired by the U.S. State Department to provide an environmental impact statement on the Keystone XL pipeline. To the disbelief and concern of climate scientists, ERM claimed that TransCanada's Keystone pipeline would not significantly contribute to climate change.

## I watched the police toss Steve, age 70, into the crowd behind me.

ERM was suspected of "misleading disclosures" regarding conflict of interest and material gain from the pipeline's completion.

Our white-haired mob of mostly grandparents converged on ERM headquarters at noon to shine a light on such shady dealings. While six silver foxes blocked the elevators by chaining their arms together inside a PVC pipe, I watched two D.C. police lift Steve, age 70, and toss him into the crowd behind me. I knew this nonviolent civil disobedience wasn't going as planned.

Chris Goodwin

Keystone XL pipeline protesters are arrested in D.C.

For the next hour the police threatened us with felony charges, and we chanted complicated ditties on Big Oil, Mother Earth, and the merits of transparency in a democracy. Then they slipped plastic cuffs over our wrists and charged us with "unlawful entry."

By the time Officer Mario found us, we were exhilarated—and tired—after our righteous deed. How wonderful to be white, comparatively wealthy, and well-lawyered-up when entering the U.S. "justice" system. He told grandkid stories and apologized for having to ask our age and weight. The station was out of intake forms, so we wrote our information on scrap paper, sharing his single pen.

Then the computers went down. A handful of us were shipped to holding cells at D.C. Central Cell Block to finish processing. No singing there. After an invasive body search, we were put two each in small, steel cells with metal bunks and walls that clanged like thunder. A bologna sandwich and water arrived at 10 p.m. We tried to encourage each other—but eventually we drew inward, silent. A little edge of panic began to creep in. How long would we be in here? Was it worth it? Am I really this weak?

We were released after little more than 12 hours in custody.

Over the next several weeks, we had two court appearances. As we waited for our case in Judge Howze's courtroom, we watched a dozen people go forward—most on charges of shoplifting from a grocery store or marijuana possession. They ranged in age from 17 to 70. None of them were white.

A few weeks later, in Judge Morin's courtroom, we agreed to stay away from ERM headquarters, as well as to avoid arrest, for six months, and were spared further jail time.

The week after our arrests, the State Department's Office of Inspector General confirmed that it was investigating alleged ERM and State Department mishandling of the Keystone XL contract.

Dorothy Day once said that "the ugliness of jail life" was "a fearful suspense, not one of normal hope and expectation." Around 1 a.m. I asked my cellmate how she was doing. "If I had to stay in here very long," she said, "I think I'd be a different person than the one I know I am."

There are more than 200,000 women incarcerated in the U.S. tonight. This is not their story. ■

***Rose Marie Berger,*** *author of* Who Killed Donte Manning? *(available at store.sojo.net), is a Catholic peace activist and a* Sojourners *associate editor.*

BY MARTIN L. SMITH

# Becoming Fluent in the Language of Hope

**THE CELEBRATED PHILOSOPHER** Ludwig Wittgenstein used to speak—disapprovingly—of "language going on holiday." For example, sportswriters often free language from the drudgery of everyday common usage to let it spread its wings in glorious hyperbole about their favorite teams.

Our biblical heritage gives us examples that are much deeper. When we read the prophets especially, we hear language liberated from the constraints of the everyday to give it a sacred vacation, a true "holy-day," so that it can return to us reinvigorated. We hear them sending language on an adventure holiday into the realm of God's future. When they receive the words back, the prophets find themselves recounting visions of a new world that God has in store.

Eschatological language that has been to the future and back exerts a powerful authority over us. In this month's scriptures we experience that authority again in Isaiah's unforgettable oracles about the holy mountain on which no one shall ever again hurt or destroy. We shall see, with our mind's eye, the rising of the sun of righteousness with healing in its wings. We shall hear Jesus speaking of the life waiting for the children of the resurrection. The church's year ends by inviting us to enter under the authority of the coming kingdom, to become fluent in its strange language of hope, harmony, and ultimate reunion with the Holy One who has reconciled all creation through the cross and resurrection.

***Martin L. Smith,*** *an Episcopal priest, is an author, preacher, and retreat leader.*

**[ NOVEMBER 3 ]**

## The Eyes Have It

**Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4; Psalm 32:1-7; 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4,11-12; Luke 19:1-10**

**SOMETIMES ONE OF** our five senses has special prominence in scripture readings. This week the eyes have it. We hear about vision, watching, seeing, and looking. In the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus, we are drawn first into the kind of looking that is full of curiosity but keeps its distance. The tax collector wants to catch a glimpse of the notorious Galilean prophet, but the backs of the crowd shut him out. He clambers into a tree and peeps down through the leaves at Jesus, who unexpectedly looks up and catches Zacchaeus, the voyeur, in the act.

> The cross is the axis around which all our destinies now turn.

This looking up turns into a looking in, as the Lord sees something in the tax collector that perhaps no one has seen before. In James Baldwin's book *The Price of the Ticket*, Baldwin describes his first encounter with artist Beauford Delaney. "When [Delaney] had completed his instant X-ray of my brain, lungs, liver, heart, bowels, and spinal column ... he smiled and said, 'Come in.'" Elsewhere Baldwin wrote, "The reality of [Delaney's] seeing caused me to begin to see." Have you ever had someone look at you that way? Jesus' penetrating look instantly begins to dissolve an inner dam that has been holding back Zacchaeus' latent joy and his latent generosity. No one else had ever suspected what was in him. Jesus gets himself invited in, and after an hour or two the floodgates have opened, revealing Zacchaeus' true self. He insists that Jesus get a good look at his real self in action: "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor" (Luke 19:8).

The prophet Habakkuk "sees" the oracle he has to proclaim. He is stationed as a watchman on the ramparts, surveying a scene of political and judicial corruption in the nation. He must rivet his disillusioned gaze on this vista of political hypocrisy, institutionalized violence, and national polarization. Like us, he protests the horrible toll that this looking takes on the heart and nerves (1:3): "Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble?" But only vigilance will detect the signs of God's redemptive action among the people. The signs must be written down and published immediately to stimulate people to urgent action in the cause of God's justice.

**[ NOVEMBER 10 ]**

## That Resurrection Nonsense

**Haggai 1:15b-2:9; Psalm 17:1-9; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17; Luke 20:27-38**

**WE WHO COMMIT** ourselves to the gospel's socially transformative power sometimes risk a too casual approach to the ultimate promise of the resurrection. It's understandable that we might react vigorously against versions of Christianity that focus only on "getting to heaven," while also compulsively threatening eternal damnation. But if we align ourselves with Jesus' firm and calm insistence that God is the God of the living, not the dead, then there is no danger of a pie-in-the-sky religiosity. The dead, in fact, are alive to God and have a role in a future fulfillment for humanity in which death has no more power.

There is something chilling about the Sadducees speaking with such certainty that the resurrection is nonsensical wishful thinking. They are confident that they can make the belief seem ludicrous by positing the case of a woman who marries seven brothers in succession. Jesus deflects their complacent agnosticism with sober insistence. God has a future for us, in which the ceaseless round of procreation will no longer be relevant, as there will be no need to replace the generations mowed down by disease and decay. In the resurrection, there will be fullness and completeness of life.

Sharing Jesus' resurrection hope places us under no risk whatsoever of slackening

our commitment to justice and peacemaking here and now. We can enjoy the comfort of a hope that actually releases our energy for social change, along the lines of Paul's blessing in 2 Thessalonians. "Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father [and Mother], who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word" (2:16-17).

**[ NOVEMBER 17 ]**

## No Stone Left Standing

**Isaiah 65:17-25; Malachi 4:1-2a; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19**

**"AS FOR THESE** things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down" (Luke 21:6). Luke records Jesus' chilling words in response to the disciples' awe-struck admiration of the mighty Herodian Temple, one of the most magnificent buildings of their age. What a disillusioning moment! I once tried the experiment of evoking this same sentiment by preaching on this text in the Washington National Cathedral, very soon after it was completed. "In a couple of thousand years," I asked, "when no one is around anymore to imagine what the great American empire used to be like, will radioactive bats be flying through the empty window sockets of the ruin?" Judging by the stricken expressions on their faces, these musings must have had quite some effect!

> Where will we hear this message proclaimed with clarity and passion?

For those who were the first to hear Luke's gospel, the unthinkable had already happened: There was only rubble where the temple had once stood. But in the meantime, something greater had been steadily growing in the community gathered under the lordship of the crucified and risen one. Even the destruction of the temple—and the wars and revolts that continually provoked the empire into more reprisals—could be spoken of as something to be patiently endured.

**[ NOVEMBER 24 ]**

## The Church's New Year

**Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 46; Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43**

**THE CHURCH BRINGS** its liturgical year to a close by evoking the theme of Christ the King. This solemn Sunday actually deploys the supreme irony and paradox of a universal Messiah reigning "from the tree," as the ancient hymns put it, a naked and battered victim of torture on the cross of shame. The Lukan passion narrative proclaims the good news to be a message about the cross—as Paul would put it, "the foolishness and weakness of God"—but in fact it is none other than the power that holds everything in existence together. The magnificent first chapter of Colossians, which we read in conjunction with the story of Good Friday, proclaims that the crucified one is the image of the invisible God, in whom all things in heaven and earth were created. The cross is the axis around which all our destinies now turn. "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of [the] cross" (1:19-20).

Where will we hear this message proclaimed with clarity and passion? Are we in a setting where the universality of the gospel's reach is fatally weakened? At times a concern for religious pluralism and inclusiveness gives rise to a notion that the way of the cross is really just an option for those who happen to be drawn to it or that Christ is a king for the few, not for all. We must cling to the notion that the cross is not a "setback" to be hastily cancelled by the resurrection. It is the revelation of "the love that moves the sun and all the other stars" in decisive action to change the fate of the world for all. ■

***"Preaching the Word,"*** *Sojourners' online resource for sermon preparation and Bible study, is available at sojo.net/ptw.*

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# NASA's Earthbound Solutions

**WITH THE HEAT** of mid-year finally over—judging by the fact that Dallas has settled into a sweater-friendly 97 degrees—it's time to look back and see what we've learned from another summer filled with unpredictable weather extremes.

For example, a couple weeks in August were actually *extremely* comfortable, which was no help to my crusade to convince Fox-loving friends that the earth is warming. Lately, even scientists have been of little use, adamantly refusing to blame rampant forest fires and extreme droughts on climate change. They insist on "analyzing" patterns of weather "over time" to honor "standards of science." There's nothing worse than climatologists dragging their feet when there are righteous accusations to be flung. Global warming is behind EVERYTHING wrong! You know it. I know it.

Okay, sorry.

But this summer had *way* too many examples of the extreme consequences of climate change, including deadly tornadoes, inundating floods, and town hall meetings that brought forth a storm of discontent. Unsuspecting members of Congress had left the comforting gridlock of Washington, D.C., and, failing to first check for a full moon, had innocently invited questions from constituents in their home districts. This is almost always a mistake. You really need to test the water before you just walk into a home district unprepared.

## Domestic space flight is an idea whose time has come.

According to many vocal Americans sitting in air-conditioned town halls, climate change is a hoax, President Obama has *still* not been born in the United States, and he refuses to renounce his Kenyan birthplace. (Even though he wasn't born there, it would be a nice gesture.) In a related matter, Texas senator and presidential hopeful Ted Cruz—is "notgonnahappenful" a word?—renounced his Canadian citizenship after discovering he was accidentally born outside the United States. It happens.

Ken Davis

But back to this global warming problem, which seems to provide a unique opportunity for NASA in its struggle with draconian budget cuts. Yes, any dream of human space flight to distant planets is now untenable, even if it was always a dumb idea to begin with. ("Houston, we found another rock!") But I'm thinking there are places here on earth just as alien and inhospitable.

Mars, for example, is extremely cold at night, but not that much colder than Fargo, North Dakota, in February, give or take. Venus is extremely hot, with temperatures reaching 900 degrees Fahrenheit—definitely hotter than Death Valley—but at some point who can tell the difference? (Outdoor chefs on Venus reportedly have to turn their sidewalk eggs more quickly, if they want them over-easy.)

My point is, instead of sending astronauts to distant parts of the galaxy, why not send them instead to, say, Phoenix? There would be several advantages:

■ Airlines fly there on a regular basis, so astronauts could book seats on one of those. Of course, as savvy travelers will tell you, they should eat before they get to the airport. You won't believe how much Tang costs at the food court these days.

■ NASA wouldn't have to lease space on Russian rockets. The next one is already a little crowded with Edward Snowden, who should have read the fine print when Russia permitted him onto its "territory."

■ Upon landing, inter-species communication would be easier, since the life forms encountered would have familiar social skills and language. Of course, astronauts would probably have to speak much louder if they wandered into an Applebee's.

■ Once the day's exploration is completed ("Houston, we found another rock! And a great taco place!"), crew members would return to the climate-controlled comfort of their home base—maybe a Hampton Inn or a Super 8—instead of an expensive landing pod.

YOU GET THE idea. Since Congress is always looking for ways to cut unnecessary expenditures, such as Head Start and food stamps—pretty much anything not produced by Lockheed Martin—domestic space exploration is an idea whose time has come. It's cheap, it's quick, and maybe even a little fun. ("Houston, can we stay longer? They've got go-carts!") ■

***Ed Spivey Jr.*** *is art director of* Sojourners.

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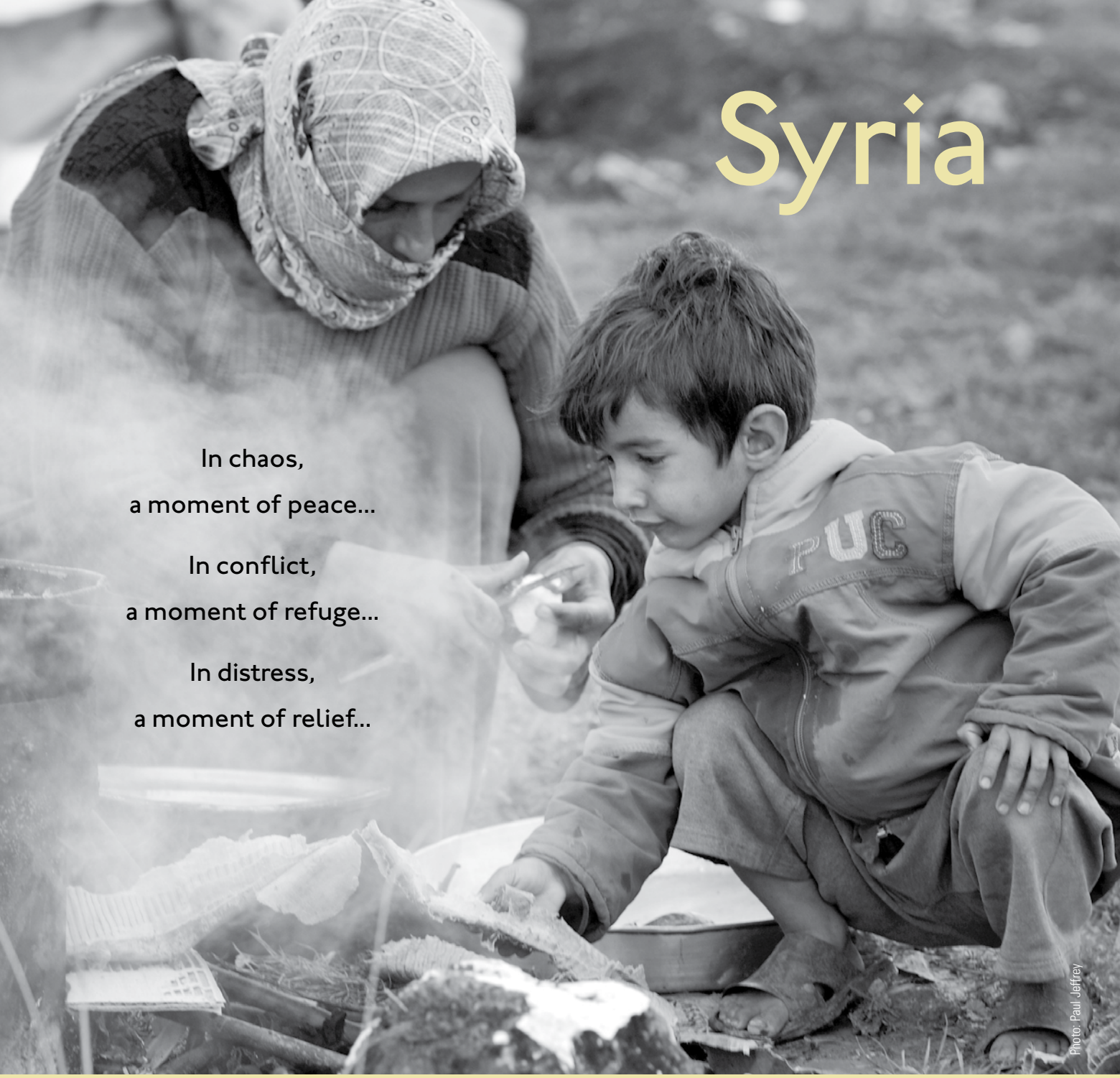


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